

魔王覚醒

精霊使いの 剣舞

ブレイドダンス

10

志瑞祐

Illustration
桜はんぺん



Kazehaya Kamito
カゼハヤ・カミト

魔王を滅ぼした伝説の剣精霊は、
神秘的な紫紺の瞳で
カミトをみつめていた。

振り向くと、そこに
可愛いウサギさんがいた。
輝く白銀の髪。ミルクのように
白い肌をピッチリと覆う、
艶やかなエナメル衣装。
網タイツにハイヒールの靴。
お尻にくっついたまるい尻尾。

Est
エスト

ツィーテールの髪はおろして
丁寧に梳られ、頭には黄金色の宝冠を載せられている。

Claire Rouge
クレア・ルージュ

早くここから逃げ出さないと――
立ち上がって走りだそうとした、瞬間。

「……あくっ！」

指先に激痛が走った。

「……まあ、当然よね」

クレアは苦痛に顔をしかめながら、うめいた。
地面に描かれた魔術方陣は、クレアを閉じ込める結界のようだ。

Scarlet
スカーレット

「きゃんっ、な、なにをするのですか!」

「す、すまん……って、しっぽ!」

カミトは目を丸くする。

カミトが手につかんでいたのは

……炎のようなしっぽだったのだ。

(……って、まてよ?)

このしっぽって、まさか……)

カミトはハッとして、ネコ耳少女の
緋色の目をまじまじと見つめた。

「……スカーレット……なのか?」

「にや、にやあ……」

緋色の髪を濡らした少女は、
恥ずかしそうにくくっと頷いた。

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Story by Shimizu Yuu

Illustrated by Sakura Hanpen

Translation

KuroiHikarai (Prologue)

zzhk (Chapter 1-9, Afterword)

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Prologue

—That was the worst fated encounter.

Under the pale moonlight, a scarlet mask had fallen and made a solid sound.

Her glamorous black hair blazed up like flames, turning burning-rouge.

“Rubia-sama...”

Fianna gulped and muttered her name.

That was the name of the 2-year-senior princess maiden, who she had most respected and admired before.

«Fire Queen»—Rubia Elstein.

Her real face beneath the mask appeared to be mostly unchanged from what she remembered in the past.

It was the same as that day when she parted with Fianna at the «Divine Ritual Institute’s» grand shrine that was blazing up in flames.

Her ruby eyes were not looking at Fianna.

Her line of sight was directly pointing at Claire, who was sitting down behind Fianna.

“U....g...”

Fianna turned around in surprise at that delicate groan.

With her back leaning on the stone wall, Claire had opened her ruby-coloured eyes.

“Claire, no—!”

“Nee...sama...?”

Claire muttered with a dazed expression.

“—Now, let’s end everything.”

Rubia Elstein gently opened her mouth.

“—It's time for the awakening of the demon king.”



“T-This can’t be true, right...?”

Claire muttered with a quivering voice.

“...After all, Nee-sama... wouldn’t do such....”

“The last time we met was the «Spirit Festival» day held in the capital.”

“...N-No way... This can’t be it.... This can’t be it!”

As if Claire was denying the reality before her eyes, she violently shook her head.

“You’re not Nee-sama. You’re just mimicking her appearance and trying to confuse me—“

Her clear ruby pupils glared at Rubia before her eyes.

“Stop the worthless farce, just reveal your true self, Witch of Theocracy!”

In that instant, a crimson flame was produced on Claire’s right hand.

Placing her hand on the wall, she stood up and released her elemental waffe.

While she wasn’t left with sufficient divine power or stamina, just the strength of her will had moved her.

(She thinks that Rubia-sama is the appearance that Sjora Kahn has transformed into.)

Fianna muttered in her heart.

Before, Sjora Kahn had shown herself using the power of demon spirit «Baldanders» and freely changing her appearance. She came to bring unrest to Claire's heart by taking Rubia's appearance. —That was the impression Claire had, and it wasn't unreasonable.

(Preferably, it'll good if she continues this misunderstanding but...)

While she bit her thumbnail, she ended up unintentionally wanting to rely on such convenient thinking.

(...If Claire knew the truth, her heart will surely be unable to bear it.)

On the other side of her strong heart and unyielding spirit, she was a very delicate girl. It wasn't like she had socialized with her for a long time like her childhood friend Rinslet, but she at least understood that.

The moment when the cruel truth was thrust before her and her heart was broken, she might end up losing the power of her spirit contract.

—Like herself, who was once called the «Lost Queen».

(I won't let you, never...!)

Fianna scolded her shaky legs.

She had to lead Claire and escape from here.

(...But how?)

Fianna had no ways of stopping Rubia. Even her Knight Spirit «Georgios» had already been annihilated by her flames—

“Turn into cinders!”

Claire released her Flametongue, aiming at Rubia.

It was a crimson flash that cut opened the night darkness. However, Rubia didn't even display any behavior of dodging. She directly held up her fingertip,

“Just confirm it with your eyes whether this is an imitation flame.”

Freezing even time, the absolute-zero conflagration—«Frost Blaze».

“...Those flames!?”

Claire widened her eyes.

Immediately following her words, clear sound like glassing shattering was heard—

The blazing Flametongue was erased by the blue flames Rubia released.

—Correction, it wasn't erased.

“...The flames froze!?”

Fianna shouted in a manner like she couldn't believe it.

That was a phenomenon that was remote from the common knowledge she learned from the «Divine Ritual Institute».

Spirit magic—which borrowed and used the power of a spirit—should be a physical phenomenon that followed the laws of nature to the upmost, no matter how bizarre that power was.

In other words, **flames freezing flames**—was a phenomenon that was impossible naturally.

(...That isn't spirit magic? Then, what on earth is that pow...)

“...A-Ah...Ah...”

“...Claire?”

Upon turning behind, she saw Claire had fallen on her knees on the ground with a shocked expression.

“...Are you really... Nee-sama?”

Seeing Claire's pale expression, Fianna understood.

That freezing flame was something that not even Sjora Kahn could imitate. Claire grasped that in an instant and was convinced.

—That she was her real sister.

“...W...hy-Why, Nee-sama...?”

Rubia Elstein didn't not reply.

Passing by at Fianna's side, she was approaching Claire.

Fianna couldn't move. Her body instinctively recalled the fear from four years ago.

Her legs cramped. Her throat cramped, and she couldn't even let out any sound.

Rubia continued walking in front of absent-minded Claire.

“Claire—“

She called her sister's name in a surprisingly peaceful voice.

“Nee-sama...”

“Come with me. To overthrow this world ruled by mad lords.”

“What...What are you saying, Nee-sama...!”

Claire looked up at her sister and shouted.

“I'll have you be the «Darkness Queen» that serves the demon king.”

“Serve the demon king...?”

“That's right. It's the reincarnated body of the «Darkness Elemental Lord» that was once sealed by the «Five Great Elemental Lords». I need a princess maiden to control it.”

“...I don't understand... I completely don't understand what you are saying, Nee-sama!”

“That's all right for now. The time when you're able to understand will come eventually.”

Rubia gently reached out her hand before Claire, who was plugging her ears.

“Claire, **take my hand.**”

“...N-No...No, Nee-sama...”

“Take my hand. ”

“...Ug...!”

The moment she repeated herself once more time with a strong tone.

Claire had taken her sister’s hand as she was told.

She looked at her face with somewhat unfocused pupils, and staggeringly stood up.

“Claire.”

Fianna shouted but Claire couldn’t hear her.

(...I see, she put «word of power» in her words.)

It was one type of mind manipulation that was the forte of the Elfim species and high-ranking princess maidens.

Loading and releasing magical powers into their words, they could control the thoughts of their target.

Elementalists of the academy should have received training to resist mind manipulation, but when the «word of power» of the «Queen» a top-ranking princess maiden was concerned, it wasn’t something one could resist for long.

All the more when one was in an unstable mental state.

(...So, this was what she was aiming for from the start.)

Fianna ground her teeth in her mind.

The reason she removed her mask and revealed her identity was to bring unrest to Claire’s heart.

Wavering under the violent shock, her heart was more fragile than delicate glassworks. No matter how strong willed the person was, it was possible to easily steal her will with «word of power».

“Nee...sa...ma...”

Light slowly parted from Claire’s ruby pupils.

(...I won’t let you!)

Encouraging her heart, she suppressed her fearful heart.

Fianna turned towards the direction the two of them were at and stepped forward.

Whether her movements were not noticed or she was not significant enough to be concerned about, Rubia didn’t even turn around. —It was probably the latter.

(...I can’t call «Georgios» anymore.)

It barely avoided being completely annihilated, but it would take at least a day for it to recover.

She was hiding a distraction «spirit crystal» in her breasts, but with that Rubia as her opponent, she didn’t think that it would have much effect.

(Something I could use as a weapon...)

She quickly moved her eyes to the top of the rubble illuminated by the blazing flames.

“...!”

—Then, that was there like it was melted into the darkness of the night.

Darkness shining in the darkness—A jet-black blade, reflecting no moonlight.

It was the darkness demon sword that Claire had been in possession of for some reason.

«Vorpall Sword»—The shape of its hilt and blade was certainly but subtly different but that was without a doubt the elemental waffe that was even called the synonym of the «Strongest Blade Dancer» Ren Ashbell.

Fianna continued walking like she was drawn in, and grabbed the demon sword that was laid on the ground.

Contrary to its appearance, it was surprisingly light. On that subject, she recalled Ren Ashbell—Kamito—swinging this sword with one hand three years ago.

“You do plan on fighting me with that demon sword.”

“...”

Like Fianna thought, her movements had been noticed.

With her hand kept held onto blank-looking Claire’s, she turned towards her.

“I wouldn’t know if I don’t try it, right?”

She planned on acting tough with all her might, but her voice might have turned messed up.

While she prayed that her hand holding the sword at least didn’t quiver, she took a stance with both hands on the demon sword of darkness.

Due to the fact that she had her knight spirit give her training before, only her stance looked somewhat right. At least it wasn’t like the time she remembered when she cut her finger.

(At any rate, why is there such a difference...?)

While she gripped the sword with her shaky hands, she casually thought in doubt.

When Rubia was in the «Divine Ritual Institute», she should have been an amateur like Fianna in relation to swords.

(Despite that, she had overwhelmed Kamito once with a sword...)

Was it possible to acquire such sword techniques in merely four years?

No, now wasn’t the time to be thinking about such things.

“Let go of Claire.”

Fianna discreetly opened her mouth.

“In exchange, I’ll be the «Darkness Queen». Sjora Kahn had said that I also have the disposition of the «Darkness Queen».”

“You certainly have the disposition of the «Darkness Queen».”

Rubia coldly nodded.

“The disposition required for the «Darkness Queen» is having a strong bond with the «Demon King». Although, with that meaning, it also means that there’s the possibility for the Fahrengart girl and the Laurenfrost girl and so on to be the «Darkness Queen».”

“...What do you mean by that?”

Since, it concerned the bonds with the «Demon King»—Kamito— she had no intention of losing to any of her teammates.

And then, if the «Darkness Queen» existence held the same meaning as the «Queens» serving the Five Great Elemental Lords, there should be no reason to disqualify Fianna, who was the former Queen candidate.

...She didn’t understand the reason that Rubia was particular over her sister.

“It’s simple. Claire’s latent quick-wittedness as a «Queen» surpasses mine.”

“...!?”

Fianna widened her dim-colored eyes.

(...A disposition greater than Rubia-sama, who’s famed as a once in hundreds of years outstanding talent?)

It wasn’t a story she could believe out of a sudden. However, Rubia calmly continued.

“The truth is that Elstein’s contracted spirit didn’t choose me but my sister. If her original talent had matured, the one chosen to be the «Fire Queen» would be her.”

“That’s...”

Certainly, the fact that Elstein’s contracted spirit «Scarlet» chose Claire and not her sister Rubia did not agree with the theory. It wasn’t like there weren’t also personality affinity problems but spirits normally contracted princess maidens with great ability as an elementalist.

“There isn’t anyone more suitable as the «Darkness Queen».”

Rubia pulled blank-looking Claire to her chest.

Claire practically didn’t put up any resistance and had given her body to her.

“Rubia-sama!”

Fianna frantically shouted.

“Claire had always lived for the sake of meeting with you. Even participating in this «Blade Dance» was just to meet you—“

“I know that.”

“...You!”

Succumbing to her fury, Fianna stepped forth with the demon sword in her hands.

Immediately following a sword slash cutting air, her light feet were swept and she fell to the ground.

“Guu...!”

“You’ll have to work on your basics before even picking a up sword.”

Rubia coldly looked down at Fianna, who had fallen.

Then, that gaze of hers turned towards the demon sword of darkness she was holding.

And—

“—Darkness spirit «Restia Ashdoll».”

She muttered, and produced that absolute-zero flame on her palm.

“...What are you planning to do?”

Fianna was in chaos.

This darkness spirit should have had an alliance relation with Rubia. Whether they had a relation like comrades do was questionable, but at least the fact that they had joined forces with the goal of awaking Kamito as the «Demon King» was certain.

“Now that the awakening of the «Demon King» is drawing near, this darkness spirit is a hindrance to my plans. Therefore, I shall annihilate it here and now—“

Cutting off with a dispassionate tone, she pointed her right hand with the blue flame dwelling on it straight down.

In its current state, the darkness spirit wasn't the elemental waffe «Vorpal Sword», it was no more than an embodiment bearing the shape of a sword.

The absolute-zero flame she released would annihilate the darkness spirit's existence without leaving a trace.

—Permanently from this world.

Then.

“...N-No...”

Claire weakly opened her mouth.

“...Claire?”

Fianna raised her head in surprise.

Claire had clung onto Rubia's arm in her state of clouded consciousness.

“...S-Stop...Nee-sama...!”

“She broke my mind control—?”

Rubia showed a surprised expression for the first time.

“That sword is...Kamito's...precious person... therefore—!”

Claire's «spirit seal» emitted a flash, and violent flames were produced in her hand.

The flames coiled into an eddy, blazed up, and transformed into a hellcat before attacking Rubia. Rubia let go of Claire's hand, and jumped back.

Releasing a growl, Scarlet pursued Rubia. It should have been kitten-sized when it guided Fianna here, but it had now returned to its original size.

(...Why? Claire should have run out of divine power.)

Normally, the power of a contracted spirit should not have been able to recover this quickly but—

Then, Fianna noticed it. The flames that were blazing in the surroundings till a while ago—Rubia's flames that annihilated «Georgios» had disappeared before she knew it.

(...I see, it absorbed Rubia-sama's flames.)

With its blazing red-hot claws, Scarlet began its fierce attack.

It seemed like it was in a condition where it lost control and was rampaging about.

“This power...You released the true name of the «Scarlet Valkyrie».”

While dodging the attacks of the rampaging hellcat, Rubia opened her mouth.

“Damn you darkness spirit, doing such unnecessary—“

Seemingly having sensed the presence of a blade dance, light-ball-like spirits had gathered in the surroundings. It was a spirit that «Divine Ritual Institute» released into the field to broadcast the state of the «Blade Dance».

Rubia clicked her tongue and then she picked up the crimson mask and put it on once more.

“...A...guu...”

An agonizing voice leaked out and could be heard above Fianna’s head.

Looking up, she saw Claire raising her breathing with a pale expression. The «spirit seal» on her right hand took on a bizarre glow, and her scarlet hair had bristled up like blazing flames.

...She was in a dangerous condition. If she continued using her contracted spirit in its rampaging condition, her divine power would be thoroughly taken and exhausted, in the worst case, it was possible that it would bring about death.

“H-Hey Claire!”

Fianna stood up in a fluster and held up Claire’s body which seemed like it was going to fall at any time.

“Hn... Fia....na...?”

Claire tilted her head to the side in her clouded state.

...She was in a so-called half-awakened state. However, as Rubia was away from her, it seemed like the light of sense was beginning to return to her eyes again.

“Claire, get yourself together!”

Fianna strongly struck Claire’s cheek. It was a violent method but it was most effective at undoing the mind control by the «word of power».

The effect was immediate. Claire widened her eyes in a snap,

“...Fianna, Nee-sama—!”

“Leave the talk for later. Our first priority is to escape from here now.”

Fianna shook her head, and grabbed Claire’s hand. Scarlet’s fierce attacks probably also wouldn’t last that long. While they had the chance, they should get as far as possible—

However, when Fianna pulled her hand, Claire ended up collapsing to the ground just like that.

“Claire!”

“...My legs... can’t move anymore—!”

Claire looked up at Fianna with a bitter expression.

...When she thought about it, it was natural.

When Fianna came here, Claire had already run out of stamina. Not to mention, in the condition where she was using the rampaging Scarlet, it was honestly impossible that she could move.

If only she could at least summon «Georgios», she would be able to carry Claire.

Transforming giant-sized, Scarlet gulped down the absolute-zero flames Rubia released.

The hellcat spirit's do-or-die spirited restraining probably also wouldn't last for another ten seconds.

(There's nothing more that can be done, huh...)

Fianna closed her eyes in despair, and at the moment.

“...Fianna, I have a request for you.”

Claire gazed at Fianna's eyes, and let out a voice.

“...A request?”

“Hold on to that demon sword, and go to Kamito.”

“...!”

Fianna was lost for words, and widened her eyes.

“T-There's definitely no way I can do that, you know!”

...There's no way she could do that. If she forsook Claire here, she would have failed as a teammate.

“—Listen to me.”

However, Claire interrupted those negation words of hers with a strong tone.

“In any case, I can’t escape anymore. Honestly, I’m barely holding onto my consciousness. However, if it’s just you, you are still able to escape—“

“I won’t escape!”

“Escape. —**Together with this kid.**”

“Eh?”

Claire reached out her right hand that held her glowing «spirit seal» before Fianna. She held out Scarlet’s seal that was engraved with blazing flames.

“I’ll entrust Scarlet to you. Your Highness.”

“...? Entrust Scarlet?”

For a moment, she failed to catch the meaning, and titled her head to the side but—

“... You don’t mean a contract transfer?”

Your Highness. She intuitively knew it with that way of addressing that she normally didn’t use.

“Yes. It should be possible between me from the Elsteins and you from the legitimate Ordesia royal family.”

“That’s just in theory...”

«Spirit transfer»—That was a unique «pledge» that came into existence in relation of lord to retainer between the royal family and the nobles.

The six great nobles of the empire including the Elsteins had pledge allegiance to the Ordesia Empire for a long time of several hundred years. To prove their loyalty, they practiced something more anciently traditional, and that was the spirit transfer pledge.

For example, in the case where there's a demand from the Ordesia royal family, the empire's six great nobles had to immediately give up the contracted spirit that served their family. This meant that the ownership of the six great nobles' spirit originally belonged to the royal family.

However, there were almost no records of this system being used in the history of the empire. In other words, it was a system that became a mere shell for the sake of symbolizing the lord-retainer relations of the rulers and the princes.

However, even that system that became a mere shell had at least left behind a framework.

Therefore, this meant that although Fianna was the «Lost Queen» who lost the rights to the inheritance of the throne, it was possible for her, who had inherited the bloodline of the royal family, to transfer the spirit of the Elsteins.

“If we continue to do nothing, Scarlet will be annihilated by Nee-sama.”

While Claire took a breath painfully, she said that.

She didn't mean that it'd lose the power to manifest in this world.

She meant that it'll be completely annihilated from this world.

“So, please. Escape together with Scarlet.”

“...”

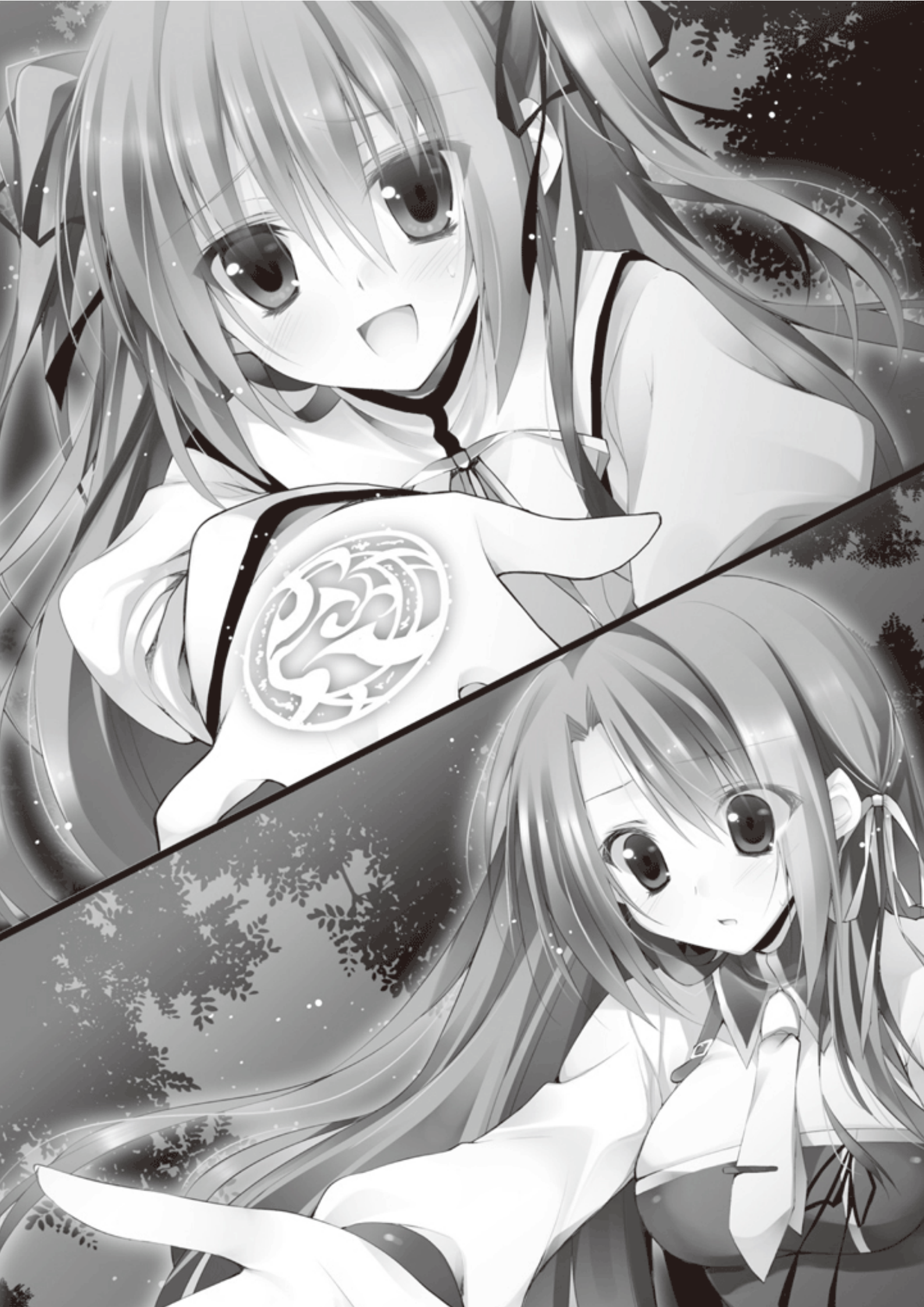
Fianna gulped at Claire's ghastly face.

She had merely several seconds of hesitation. However, those several seconds were extremely precious currently.

—There was no time to hesitate. Fianna made her resolution and nodded.

“I got it. Elsteins loyalist—”

Grasping the right hand that Claire reached out, she recited from memory the words of the pledge.



“By my name Fianna Ray Ordesia, second princess of the Ordesia Empire, I humbly order you. Thou, by the pledge exchanged by our great ancestors, offer up thy sword to me—“

The Spirit Language words were strung out like a song. In response, Claire also made her lips quiver.

“Our sword is our lord’s sword, we shall offer up the undying, eternal flame to thou—“

The fire spirit seal emitted a flash that even dazzled one’s eyes, and Claire’s blood dripped down onto the ground.

In that instant, a sharp pain like that of a burn ran through Fianna’s right hand.

“...Guuu...!”

Fianna frowned like she was bearing with the pain, and grasped her hand.

Moving her hand timidly, a fire seal, glowing scarlet-red, had been engraved on the back of her right hand.

—The transfer of the contracted spirit succeeded.

“...Thank you. Now, quickly get away.”

Claire smiled and collapsed once more like she had used up all her strength.

Rubia noticed the unusualness of Scarlet’s sudden disappearance, and turned around towards them.

“After I meet up with Kamito-kun and the others, I’ll definitely come to help!”

After somehow leaving just those words to her, Fianna ran off with the demon sword of darkness in her hand.

Chapter One

Muir Alenstarl

—The first night of the «Blade Dance» final round had arrived.

After defeating Muir Alenstarl's militarized spirit «Valaraukar», Kamito and his entourage left the center of the «Abandoned City» and took refuge at the historical ruins of a shrine to rest.

The fire spirit crystal they placed on the ground glowed red, illuminating the pitch black darkness in the shrine. A simple hearth was built using stones nearby and a pot bubbled as soup boiled inside it.

"...Night time in «Astral Zero» is really cold after all."

Sitting on Kamito's right, Ellis shivered.

"...Yeah. It really did not feel that cold during the preliminary round."

"That was thanks to Her Highness the imperial princess' «Barrier»."

Sitting on Kamito's left, Rinslet replied.

Holding a bowl and a spoon in her hands respectively, she was dressed in a cute apron over her uniform.

Despite being a highborn daughter hailing from the Empire's elite nobles, the aproned look suited her unexpectedly well.

"It is possible to set up a barrier of wind, but divine power will involuntarily spread out and easily attract swarms of «Forsaken Spirits». Furthermore, it would be best to conserve energy for now."

Ellis nodded honestly. After all, she had exhausted her strength in the consecutive battles against Lily Flame and «Valaraukar».

Similarly, having exhibited norm-defying power for Kamito's sake, Est was now in deep slumber in sword form. Resting against the wall, she was probably not going to wake up for quite a while.

"Speaking of which, Captain..."

Rinslet coughed deliberately.

"Aren't you leaning too close to Kamito-san?"

Ellis instantly blushed.

"I-I cannot help it. Unlike you who were born in the northern part of the country, I am very vulnerable to cold."

"Your demon wind spirit should be quite warm to hug. Claire frequently uses Scarlet as a body pillow."

"...But «Simorgh»'s face is kind of scary."

"Well, well, indeed it is an intrepid face."

Watching Kamito's group as they chatted—

"..."

The girl sitting opposite them bore a blankly staring expression.

Her ash-gray hair was tied up on the sides of her head. Her eyes were blue like the surface of a pristine lake.

Dressed in a military uniform, her petite body was sitting with her knees drawn up to her chest.

Muir Alenstarl—the «Instructional School»'s second ranked combatant.

The extraordinary «Monster»—specialized in mass destruction.

Like a small animal that was wary of humans, she kept a delicate distance away from Kamito's group.

"Muir, you're going to catch a cold. Why don't you move closer to the fire?"

Hearing Kamito's words, the two young ladies beside him instantly prepared a stance.

This sort of tense atmosphere had repeated itself many times.

(...Oh well, it's only natural for these two to be on alert.)

After all, Muir was the one who attacked them only hours earlier.

Furthermore, Muir had tried to kill them before.

These acts could not be forgiven nor forgotten so easily. In actual fact, the two highborn ladies were not exactly pleased with the way Kamito was handling things.

Muir quietly shook her head.

"Don't wanna. The temptresses who bewitched Onii-sama are over there."

"W-What are you talking about!?" "Well I never!"

Ellis and Rinslet raised their voices at the same time.

"Kamito, I still think we should take away her «Magic Stone»."

"Seconded. She is far too dangerous!"

Indeed, after fighting «Valaraukar»—

Kamito had decided explicitly not to take away Muir's «Magic Stone».

In a blade dance, taking the loser's «Magic Stone» was the winner's legitimate right. In fact, Kamito's decision could be said to contravene the spirit of the «Blade Dance» held by the «Elemental Lords».

Naturally, Ellis and Rinslet were likewise opposed to Kamito's decision. Even so, Kamito did not take Muir's «Magic Stone» because he wanted to have a good chat with her after four years of separation.

(Also...)

On the day the «Instructional School» was attacked by the unidentified archdemon...

Kamito felt quite guilty about leaving young Muir behind alone.

"Muir is not an ordinary elemental. Having lost her militarized spirit, she can't do anything."

In actual fact, Muir was not even capable of using a contracted spirit. The special power she was born with—the «Jester's Vise», caused spirits to go berserk until their very being was consumed to nothing.

"Ara, even without a contracted spirit, killing you Onee-chans is still very easy."

"...What did you say!?"

Hearing Muir's boastful remark, Ellis glared back severely.

"...Muir lost to Onii-sama, yes, but Muir did not lose to you two, Onee-chans."

"Guh...!"

"Muir, shut up—"

Kamito forcefully ended her conversation.

"...What you just said now, even I would be angered!"

"Onii-sama...?"

"Stop talking about killing this or that whatever all the time."

Kamito stared at Muir head on.

"..."

Muir began to sulk and pout—

"...Yes, Onii-sama."

Despite her reluctance, she still nodded.

Kamito secretly breathed a sigh of relief.

(...Muir is not a bad kid.)

She simply had no concept of good and evil.

This was a common trait in the orphans raised by the «Instructional School».

(...Before meeting Restia, I was the same too.)

"The soup is ready."

Cough cough. Rinslet coughed deliberately.

As she lifted the lid for the pot, a delicious aroma of fish soup wafted over.

The crimson soup was filled with chilli peppers and spices with diced pieces of white-colored fish, shelled prawns, scallops, mussels and other sumptuous ingredients.

"Wow, looks very delicious!"

"This is Bouillabaisse-style fish soup. It's very effective in warming up the body."

"...You really know how to make everything."

"I made preparations in advance before the finals began. Besides, «Fenrir»'s alternate dimension is even able to keep the fish fresh."

Sitting by her obediently, Fenrir barked happily when it heard words of praise from her.

As soon as Kamito received a bowl of soup from her, he instantly drank in big mouthfuls.

"Gulp gulp... Phew..."

"Does it suit your tastes?"

Rinslet asked, a little apprehensive.

"...Tasty!"

Kamito burped with satisfaction.

Despite the large amount of chilli peppers in the red soup, it was not as spicy as its appearance suggested. A complicated mix of delicious seafood flavors were concentrated together. The soup warmed the entire body from within.

"Phew, looks like my efforts were not in vain... Fufu♪"

Rinslet happily covered her red cheeks with her hands.

"Hmm, so Kamito turns out to enjoy spicy cuisine, I see now..."

For some reason, Ellis began to write a note in her mysterious booklet with a serious expression while sitting beside Kamito.

"Muir, you must be hungry, right?"

Kamito extended a bowl filled with fresh soup out to Muir.

"Don't want any. Not hungry either. I don't want charity from enemies."

"...~Y-You, what is with that attitude!?"

Seeing Rinslet anger, Kamito frantically tried to make peace.

"You just used a militarized spirit of that level. You can't possibly be not hungry."

"Trained combatants from the «Instructional School can execute combat missions continuously for a week without eating."

"...That's true. However, now is not the same kind of situation."

Kamito shrugged and moved the steaming bowl beneath Muir's nose.

"..."

Gulp... Muir swallowed.

"Come on, just drink a mouthful. While it's still hot."

"Hmph, Muir's stomach is not hungry..."

...Growl.

A cute sound resounded in the shrine.

"...See?"

"...~!"

Muir shifted her gaze away from the soup defiantly.

"D-Don't wanna. Maybe it's poisoned."

"How impudent, of course I won't poison it!"

Rinslet objected loudly.

"Hmph, who knows?"

"...Sorry, Muir doesn't mean any offense."

Kamito apologized softly for Muir's words.

"In the place where we were raised, wariness of poison is only natural..."

"...I-I see."

Despite her domineering airs, Rinslet was actually quite gentle at heart. Displaying a mixed expression, she nodded.

"Muir, don't worry. See, aren't I drinking it too?"

Kamito drank a mouthful of soup in Muir's view.

"..."

"See?"

Muir gurgled in her throat.

"I-In that case..."

"Hmm?"

"Onii-sama must feed Muir. Or else Muir refuses to believe."

Suddenly, she said something incredible.

"...Eh?"

"What did you say!?" "What!?"

Ellis and Rinslet yelled at the same time.

"...I-I need to feed you, Muir?"

"That's right, Onii-sama."

As if examining Kamito's expression, Muir smiled mischievously.

"Muir, don't toy with me."

"Not toying with Onii-sama... See, ah~!"

She slowly drew her face near and opened wide her lovely dainty lips.

Kamito could not help but feel his heart racing. Then—

"...Seriously, what am I going to do with you?"

Shrugging lightly, he filled a spoon with soup and delivered it into Muir's mouth.

"...O-Onii-sama!?"

Widening her eyes, Muir's face instantly went bright red.

She swallowed the soup with a gulp.

"...Hmph, n-not bad!"

She offered her comment as she turned her gaze away.

"A-Another, okay... Ah~!"

"W-Wait a minute!" "Hold it right there!"

Ellis and Rinslet frantically interfered.

"Kamito, th-that is so unfair! Me too..."

"S-Same here, I-I want..."



Blushing, the two girls shyly demanded.

"W-Why would you two want to be fed too, Ellis and Rinslet!?"

"I just want it!"

"Indeed! I simply want it!"

Closing their eyes, the two girls brought their faces near.

...Although Kamito had no idea what was going on, he decided it would be prudent to simply do as they say.

"...Okay, say ah—"

"...Aamph♪" "...Ah~♪"

Kamito delivered the spoon into the lovely lips of the highborn ladies one after another.

"Oooh... What is up with me, to have done something so shameful..."

"Th-This is so embarrassing!"

Covering their blushing faces with their hands, the two girls murmured in seductive-sounding voices.

...Looking like that, they really seemed so innocent and adorable.

"No, I feel quite embarrassed too..."

Kamito scratched his face awkwardly.

"...Onii-sama!"

Watching Kamito, Muir pouted unhappily.



After enjoying a modest yet delicious meal consisting of bread and soup only—

"...How vexing, Onii-sama really became the Demon King of the Night!"

Muir sulked and said.

Currently, Kamito and Muir were the only ones present inside the shrine.

Ellis and Rinslet had gone outside for regular princess maiden purification.

There was apparently an ancient purification site near these ruins.

Although the two girls left partially for scouting out incoming attacks, their main reason was to let Kamito and Muir have some private time together.

"...D-Demon King of the Night? Where did you hear that from?"

"Lily has always been investigating Onii-sama all along!"

"...I see."

Kamito answered with his eyes half closed.

"...This is totally a misconception, okay? By the way, why would a highly accomplished master of espionage like Lily gather such erroneous information?"

"Because instead of being erroneous, it is the truth?"

"Rejected absolutely."

Kamito shook his head insistently. That is so not the truth... Probably.

(...Wait a minute, now is not the time for chatting about this.)

He coughed deliberately.

"Say, Muir—"

"...What is it? Onii-sama."

"...Uh, why do you call me Onii-sama?"

Kamito asked directly.

Ever since their first encounter at the «Instructional School», Muir had been addressing Kamito as Onii-sama.

He had asked many times in the past and each time her answer was the same.

"—Not gonna tell you. Onii-sama, figure it out yourself."

...That was it.

Muir turned away sullenly.

"If I can't remember, then I won't recall it no matter how much I try. I basically remember nothing from my childhood or when I was first brought to the facility."

Indeed, in the dark dungeon where the flow of time could not be sensed, Kamito and the others had received combat training nonstop.

Or perhaps, it was precisely the combat training in the dungeon that gradually shaved off Kamito's memories and emotions, destroying them.

Probably because of that, Kamito had no impression of his homeland.

The only memories he barely preserved were—

(Those times he spent together with Restia...)

...Anyway, pursuing the matter like this would probably just make Muir lock her heart away even more, which would be putting the cart before the horse. Kamito tried to change the subject.

"Muir, what happened on that day?"

"On that day?"

"Four years ago. After the «Instructional School» was wrecked by the archdemon of flame... By the way, you fought the archdemon directly, didn't you, Muir?"

"Yeah, fought—and lost."

As if completely unconcerned with her defeat, Muir nodded calmly.

The archdemon who only needed half a day to destroy the «Instructional School», an organization in command of the strongest combat skills. Back then, Muir was obviously no match because she had level restrictions on the spirits she was authorized to employ.

"Not long after that, the Empire sent the «Numbers» to investigate. Many people were captured but Muir had already escaped long before then—"

Henceforth, she wandered around until she came into contact with «Murders» on a certain street.

There, she was hired as a professional assassin and began living in the underground circuit.

(...Just like me.)

All the orphans who grew up in that facility knew no other way to survive. Let alone relying on relatives, even their family registry records were nonexistent. Where Muir and Kamito's fates diverged was the fact that Kamito's first assassination target was the «Dusk Witch».

"...Next, meeting up with Lily happened two years later."

After making contact with Lily Flame using the intelligence network of the «Murders», Lily introduced Muir to that woman named «Cardinal». After that, «Cardinal»—

"She is the one who now calls herself Ren Ashbell, the «Strongest Blade Dancer»."

"Was she using the «Murders» network to gather orphans from the «Instructional School»?"

Due to the «Instructional School»'s collapse, the orphans who were left with nowhere to go were highly likely to make contact with «Murders».

She probably put informants in place beforehand in anticipation of that.

That Jio Inzagi was most likely recruited in the same manner.

"That woman told me I could meet Onii-sama as long as I entered the «Blade Dance»."

"She—Ren Ashbell, what is her goal?"

Muir shook her head.

"No idea. I don't care about what she thinks."

"...I see."

...On further thought, it was true. «Team Inferno»'s members did not share a common goal. They were simply an alliance with aligned interests.

"However, that woman did say—"

Muir pressed her index finger against her lips.

"Muir and others were gathered for the sake of making Onii-sama awaken."

"—'Awaken.'"

Kamito was shocked.

...For some reason, the word made him feel quite unsettled.

"So, awakening means... Making me retrieve my past power?"

"Who knows? Indeed, Onii-sama is a lot more useless than before."

Ignoring for now Muir's caustic commentary—

(...Was Ren Ashbell and Restia's goal simply "that" alone?)

Kamito muttered to himself mentally.

According to Fianna who was captured by Sjora Kahn once, Kamito was the current reincarnation of the «Demon King» who inherited the power of the Darkness Elemental Lord, «Ren Ashdoll».

(...Within my body, is that kind of existence really present?)

Ever since the «Blade Dance» started, he kept feeling something awakening within him.

Was he really recovering his power from three years ago gradually or was there more to it?

"...Onii-sama?"

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about something."

Seeing Muir tilt her head, Kamito scratched his head as he apologized.

"Seriously, all Onii-sama needs to think about is Muir."

Muir pouted and rested her head against Kamito's chest.

"...Muir?"

"All I want is to have Onii-sama by my side. Everything else is not needed. This world hates Muir, so it would be best if all others disappeared."

"It's not like that..."

Kamito was just about to refute her assertion when—

"Because, see—"

Suddenly, Muir touched the burning fire spirit crystal with her hand.

Instantly, the fire spirit sealed in the crystal went berserk and spewed out intense flames.

"—Muir!"

Kamito frantically grabbed Muir's arm.

"W-What on earth are you doing!?"

Only to find Muir's palm slightly burned.

"...See? I am being hated. By this world."

"..."

The special ability Muir was born with—the «Jester's Vise».

Spirits touched by her all descended into madness.

The berserk spirits eventually used up all their power and disappeared from the world.

It could not even be considered a special power but a cruel curse.

"Since the world has rejected Muir, Muir will reject the world."

Looking down upon the fire spirit spewing intense flames. she murmured.

"But back then, only Onii-sama did not reject me."

"Back then?"

"Yes. The day Onii-sama was brought to the «Instructional School»."

"...Sorry. I really—have no recollection of those times."

"It's okay if you can't remember. To Onii-sama, it was probably just an insignificant remark. But to Muir, it was an important promise."

Muir displayed a dream-like a smile and yawned cutely.

"...Hoo, getting sleepy here."

"Probably time to retire for the night. I have to recover my energy too."

Injuries could be cured using magic, but sleep was the best method to replenish depleted divine power.

"Is it really okay for you not to take Muir's «Magic Stone»?"

"Hmm?"

"Maybe while Onii-sama is sleeping, Muir will steal Onii-sama's «Magic Stone»?"

"You're not going to do that, Muir."

Kamito then laid himself down on the ground. With Ellis' «Simorgh» keeping watch outside, surprise attacks from other teams should not be a worry.

Looking up at the ceiling that was entangled with tree roots, Kamito spoke up.

"Hey, Muir—"

"What is it? Onii-sama?"

"Say, once the «Blade Dance» is finished, do you want to return with me to the Empire?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Given Greyworth's resources, she should be able to fabricate family registry records for a younger sister. In addition, if I ask Rinslet, you can probably become a maid at the Laurenfrost family. After all, their only criterion for hiring maids is whether you're cute or not."

"C-Cute!?"

Hearing Kamito's unintentional comment, Muir blushed intensely.

"Hmph, hmph. Muir hates maids!"

Declaring angrily, Muir turned away to the side and went to sleep.

...In the end, Muir never answered Kamito's question.



Splash, quiet water noises were heard under the pitch black night.

"Captain, your breasts have grown even bigger..."

"W-What are you talking about!?"

Ellis frantically covered her bust with her arms. Droplets of water dripped down from the tips of her wet hair.

Beneath the faint moonlight, Ellis and Rinslet were taking a bath in the purification site.

As the clear spring water used for rituals stimulated their skin, it helped calm their bodies which felt like they were burning.

Naturally, Kamito was the reason why they felt scorching hot as if being burned.

"Huff... With Kamito-san, an indirect, kiss huh..."

"As a knight, what indecency have I committed..."

Having finally cleansed their bodies, they now found their minds instantly occupied by these worries.

For these sheltered highborn ladies, the "Ah~" act just now was too stimulating.

Losing their focus midway, they were unable to carry out the ritual very well.

...Hence, the two girls spent far more time on purification than usual.

"Very soon, the sun will be up."

The battle from last night was not that long ago. As they looked towards the center of the abandoned city, the flames released by «Valaraukar» were still burning intensely.

"By the way—"

Wringing the water out of her wet hair, Rinslet spoke up at this time.

"That girl who uses militarized spirits. Just a little bit, she reminds me of Claire in the past."

"...In hairstyle?"

Ellis frowned.

"Not that... Basically, after the Rubia incident, Claire pretty much acted similar to that. Treating everyone around as enemies, like a little animal baring its fangs out of fear—"

"...Ah yes. Indeed, Claire was pretty much like that last year."

Back when Velsaria was still the leader, the «Sylphid Knights» had engaged Claire in battle numerous times. Even after Ellis took over the Knights, they were often in opposition with Claire.

That said, Rinslet here would often interfere in those battles too.

"I hope Claire and Fianna gathered together safely—"

Just as Ellis looked up at the night sky.

—An explosion was heard coming from afar.

"...What happened!?"

"Captain, that's—"

Rinslet pointed at the sky ahead of them.

Over there was a flying dragon, flapping its wings.

"That's the flying dragon spirit from the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor»...!"

The flying dragon spirit seemed to be circling in the air as if searching for something, spitting fireballs at the ground.

Then a bright light flashed on the ground, dazzling Ellis and Rinslet whose eyes had already adjusted to the dark environment.

"That flash? Could it be one of Her Highness the imperial princess' spirit crystals?"

"Yes, no mistake about it. I will immediately head forth to her aid. You hurry and go wake Kamito."

"Understood!"

Inside the shrine, Kamito's quiet breathing could be heard.

He must have accumulated a great amount of fatigue from the two consecutive battles against «Valaraukar». He was quite sound asleep.

Of course, as soon as Muir emitted any killing intent, he would probably wake up instantly.

Muir gazed at Kamito's sleeping face.

"...Onii-sama."

She murmured with a barely audible voice.

"Onii-sama, you really are the Onii-sama whom Muir loves most."

Do you want to return with me to the Empire—That was what he said.

Just like that day in the past, during their first encounter.

—In that case, I will be your friend.

—Hmph, that's stupid of you. To think you'd try to make friends here.

—Then let me be your brother. You'll be the younger sister, Muir.

(Onii-sama probably has forgotten already...)

Even so, these words were very important to Muir.

It brought a shred of solace to the «Monster»'s broken-down heart.

(...However, I'm sorry. Onii-sama.)

Having lived in darkness for so long, the «Monster» could no longer integrate herself into the world of sunlight.

Muir placed her «Magic Stone» by Kamito's pillow side.

"—Goodbye, Onii-sama. I will be very happy the next time we play together again."

Finally, a sad smile surfaced—

Muir Alenstarl vanished from the front stage of the «Blade Dance».

Chapter Two

The Darkness Beckons Invitingly

—This person is the Demon King's successor.

—We of the «Snake» have, for a very long time now, looked forward to the child of destiny.

In a dark prison, the young Kamito was surrounded heavily by a group of old men wearing faceless masks.

His arms and legs were completely immobile. Even trying to speak or shift his gaze was impossible.

...He realized he was in a dream.

A dream where one was aware of being in a dream—A lucid dream.

However, Kamito could not wake himself up.

It was as if someone had reached out and dragged him into an abyss of his consciousness.

—Once the plan comes to fruition, our tragic wish shall be realized.

—But it is still slightly too early for him to make contact with *her*.

—First, the heart of this child of destiny must be obliterated first.

The old men's words reverberated in the prison.

(Stop... it... Stop it immediately!)

Countless arms reached out from the darkness, obscuring Kamito's vision.

His view went dark. As soon as he opened his eyes again, Kamito found himself suspended in endless darkness.

His arms and legs were tightly entangled and restrained by darkness that felt like mud.

(...What the heck is this?)

It was not the first time for him to be having nightmares about his time at the «Instructional School» but none of them were like this one.

—You are the child of darkness, our successor.

An astounding voice sounded within his mind.

(...Who... is it...?)

The voice did not belong to the old men. More alien in quality—an inhuman voice.

—We are the past reincarnations of the «Demon King». Our past existences were identical to yours.

Amidst the pitch black mud, numerous skeletons surfaced.

(You are—«Nepenthes Lore»!?)

That was how the ominous black knight looked, the one whom Restia led around.

(...Saying that I am the same existence as you, what on earth is that about?)

This was a dream. The monster before his eyes was nothing but an illusion in Kamito's mind.

Even so, it was imperative to question the monster.

—Sleeping within you, the «Demon King» is about to awaken.

—You will likely fall to become an existence equal to ours, to become the most terrible «Demon King» in history.

(...Complete rubbish! I'm neither going to become the Demon King nor will I become like you guys!)

Squeezing out a voice that could not be described as a voice, Kamito yelled as hard as he could.

Numerous Nepenthes Lores were restless in the darkness, laughing loudly as they disappeared.

At the same time, Kamito's consciousness sank into the pitch black mud.

—By the way, Kamito.

Just as he was about to lose consciousness, he heard her voice.

—when I have changed so much that I am myself no longer...

—Kill me.

(Res... tia...!)



"Huff, huff, huff..."

Feeling an unpleasant feeling like he had fallen somewhere, Kamito woke up.

His heart was racing abnormally quickly. His body also felt quite heavy with sweat.

The sense of terror from falling into the darkness was still lingered vividly in his mind.

"...A nightmare? Those have been rare ever since I came to the Academy."

Kamito wiped the sweat off his brow and sighed.

Probably due to the series of intense battles, his nerves had become over excited.

At this moment.

"—Kamito, are you okay?"

He heard a cute voice coming from above.

"...!?"

Kamito frantically jumped up.

Turning around, he found a cute little rabbit.

Long lustrous silver-white hair. Clad over her milky-white skin was a tight-fitting, erotic, enameled outfit. Over her legs she was wearing fishnet tights with high heel boots. Behind her was a round fluffy tail.

Most striking of all was the pair of rabbit ears on top of her head.

The legendary sword spirit, who had vanquished the Demon King, was now gazing at Kamito with her mysterious violet eyes.

"Umm..."

Despite Kamito's ignorance in worldly matters, he still knew this much.

...This was commonly known as the bunny girl.

The question was why would his contracted spirit be dressed up in this manner—

"...Est, what on earth are you doing?"

"Yes. I am acting as Kamito's pillow."

Est nodded expressionlessly.

"Pillow?"

Dressed in her bunny girl outfit, Est was sitting formally in a kneeling position.

...Come to think of it, I was sleeping on the ground and yet my head didn't hurt at all.

"Est, were you providing me with a lap pillow?"

"Yes, Kamito. You seemed like you were having a nightmare."

Est must have been quite worried as she watched Kamito experiencing a nightmare. However, rather than wake up Kamito who was exhausted, she chose to give him a lap pillow instead.

"Thank you, Est."

As Kamito stroked her head, Est half-closed her eyes in enjoyment.

"...But why are you dressed as a bunny girl?"

"Even if it's you, Kamito, I feel embarrassed if someone touches my bare legs."

Est remained expressionless despite the blush on her face, answering in a whisper.

...I see. For some reason, this sword spirit was immensely ashamed of exposing her legs. Even though it was just her lap, letting Kamito rest upon them must have been quite embarrassing for her. Hence, instead of wearing her usual knee socks she chose fishnet tights instead.

"...Then what about the rabbit ears?"

"Yes. A rare opportunity."

"...I see, a rare opportunity."

"Yes."

...Oh well, if she simply wore fishnet tights with nothing else, it would be rather troubling after all.

"Kamito, are you unhappy with this getup?"

The rabbit ears she wore on her head were swaying slightly apprehensively.

"No, umm... I-It's very cute!"

Kamito frantically followed up with a compliment.

"..."

The rabbit ears jumped in joy.

Although Est remained expressionless as always, it was much easier to read her emotions from the rabbit ears on her head.

(...Hmm, this is quite convenient. Wouldn't it be nice if she wore them all the time?)

Just as this joking thought crossed his mind—

"...Strange?"

Kamito suddenly realized.

...Muir was missing.

"Est, where did Muir go?"

"When I woke up, she was already gone."

"...?"

Kamito surveyed his surroundings.

The fire of the spirit crystal still provided lighting within the shrine.

Kamito could not have slept for too long a duration.

"Where did that girl go?"

She could not have left the shrine alone, right? Even for Muir, without a militarized spirit for her to command, wandering alone in this «Abandoned City» was too dangerous.

—At this moment, Kamito's searching gaze stopped at a certain spot.

Beside where Kamito had been sleeping, for an instant, something flashed.

"This is..."

Approaching for a closer look, Kamito found a tiny red stone rolling there.

As the symbol of «Team Inferno», it was a «Magic Stone» carved with an emblem of snakes and flames.

«Magic Stones» had to be kept on one's person. Once separated from the body for a certain length of time, «Leap» magic would be forcibly triggered.

The placement of the stone implied that Muir had retired from the «Blade Dance» by her own volition.

"Muir..."

Muttering softly, Kamito picked up the «Magic Stone».

Clearly he still had so much more to chat with her about—

"Kamito?"

"...Oh, it's nothing."

Nodding, Kamito placed the «Magic Stone» into his uniform pocket.

(...Muir, you're not some kind of «Monster» but a noble elementalist.)

At this moment, the sound of frantic footsteps came from outside.

"...What's going on?"

Kamito instantly readied his stance and looked towards the entrance.

However, as soon as he recognized the girl's figure in the darkness, he relaxed his guard.

"K-Kamito-san!"

Rinslet rushed into the shrine.

She was probably in the middle of purification when she made her way back, for her platinum-blond hair was still wet.

"Rinslet, what happened?"

"Her Highness the imperial princess is nearby... Hey, w-what are you two doing there?"

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

Rinslet's gaze was cast behind Kamito's back.

Obviously, that was where bunny girl Est was located.

"A-A misunderstanding... B-By the way, what happened actually?"

Kamito inquired hastily, prompting Rinslet to recall all of a sudden.

"Her Highness the imperial princess is currently engaged in battle nearby against the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor»."

"...Fianna? I got it, let's go immediately."

Kamito stood up, holding Est's hand.

"Est, I'm sorry we have to do this so soon after recovering, but I'm relying on you."

"Yes, I am your sword, your wish is my command."

The pair of rabbit ears quivered slightly.

Next, Est transformed into a massive sword shining with silver-white light.



"Huff, huff... I hate this, such a hassle!"

As fireballs rained down upon the roads in the ruins, Fianna was panting as she ran away.

Hiding herself amongst the shadows in the collapsed wasteland, she kept diving into blind spots in the flying dragon spirit's overhead view.

"...!"

Suddenly, the nearby ground shook, forcing Fianna to stop running.

The wall in the ruins she was using to hide herself began to crumble, producing a cloud of dust and dirt.

"...W-What?"

Peering at the road from behind a stone pillar, she found a large earth dragon appearing out of the darkness.

Like the flying dragon elemental in the sky, this was also one of Dracunia's dragon knights.

(A terrible situation...)

Fianna hid behind the stone pillar once more and bit her thumb.

Although an earth type tyrant dragon spirit was unable to fly, it possessed excellent sensing abilities.

It would most likely discover Fianna if she continued to hide like this. But as soon as she left the ruins she would be found by the flying dragon spirit from the air.

Unable to summon her contracted spirit, Fianna was currently a sitting duck.

(...I still have three of those blinding flash stones.)

It was quite inconceivable that the renowned «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» could be shaken off her trail using little tools like these.

(How could I allow myself to be eliminated in a place like this...)

Fianna reached her hand towards the sword hanging at her waist.

The demon sword of darkness that Claire had entrusted to her—The «Vorpall Sword».

(...I promised her, I will hand this sword to Kamito.)

Walking carefully to avoid making a sound, Fianna cautiously bided her time for an escape opportunity.

Surprisingly, this opportunity arrived quite quickly.

The sound of wind tearing through the atmosphere apart was heard.

Instantly, the wings of the flying dragon spirit circling above were sliced apart!

The flying dragon spirit spun as it fell.

The tyrant dragon elemental's attention was drawn to that direction.

(Now...!)

Fianna had no idea what was going on, but undoubtedly this was a rare opportunity.

She instantly jumped out from behind the stone pillar and ran along the road.

"You—!"

The tyrant dragon elemental sensed Fianna's presence.

At the same time, Fianna tossed out two blindingly bright «Spirit Crystals» in one go.

An explosive flash instantly dyed the pitch black night into white.

"Guh...!"

Taking advantage of the opening, Fianna hid behind the pillar again.

Looking up, she found two knights engaged in an intense blade dance with sparks flying and scattering.

The clashing weapons rang out acutely. A girl familiar to Fianna was enveloped in strong winds as she engaged the single-winged flying dragon spirit in an aerial battle.

"...Ellis!"

The ponytail fluttering in the wind and that stern figure undeniably belonged to no one but her.

Wielding «Ray Hawk» in her hands, she intended to follow up the surprise attack just now with a ferocious offensive.

This was no coincidence. She must have arrived as reinforcements, knowing Fianna was near.

ROOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAR!

"...!?"

At this moment, an angry dragon's roars shook the land.

The tyrant dragon spirit on the ground had started to destroy the wall of the ruins where Fianna was hiding.

(...If this continues, these ruins will collapse!)

Fianna produced from her palm a magical glow and jumped out from behind the pillar.

Possessing night vision, the dragon spirit instantly spotted Fianna and charged with a great rumbling.

However, Fianna calmly chanted spirit magic—

"Those of small stature, go forth and dance in the moonlit night! — «Fairy Flare»!"

Fianna released numerous spheres of light towards the charging tyrant dragon spirit.

Being the only light source in the darkness would of course make one the perfect prey, but it was a completely different matter when numerous glowing objects were present.

Mixed amongst the irregularly dancing little spheres of light, Fianna's figure once again disappeared into a back alley.

"Huff, huff, huff..."

Weaving through the winding path, she reached a place surrounded by a gloomy and creepy forest.

Once here, even the flying dragon spirit would find it difficult to spot her from the air.

(...!?)

A sudden chilling sense of terror caused Fianna to halt in her steps.

Immediately, a massive object flew past, right before her.

Crash—A heavy shattering sound was heard.

As the stone tiled cracked open, a huge hole was opened up in the ground ahead.

"...!"

Fianna was instantly scared frozen.

The object that had opened up a hole in the ground—a massive wrecking ball connected to a chain.

"...Hey, your instincts are not bad. To be able to escape this «Morningstar»."

Clack—Accompanied by a heavy sound, the iron ball and chain were pulled back.

Fianna turned to find a girl standing on top of a collapsed stone wall.

A petite girl with her dark brown hair trimmed neat and short.

Wielding a massive wrecking ball in one hand, she looked down at Fianna.

She was dressed in a red uniform with white trimmings.

"The Sacred Spirit Knights..."

Fianna groaned with despair.

...Backed into a corner, only to find herself targeted by yet another team.

"Belonging to team «Stahl Loewe» of the Sacred Spirit Knights—Alda Reed."

The girl announced her name loudly and swung the chain nimbly.

"—Hand over the «Demon Sword of Darkness» in your possession immediately."

The giant wrecking ball was launched again—!

(...!)

Just as Fianna closed her eyes, in that very instant—

Clang——!

A clear metallic sound rang out through the dark night.

"...Eh?"

A voice of surprise escaped from Fianna's lips.

"At least I made it."

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Only to find *him* standing before her.

The young man wielding the «Demon Slayer» with dazzling brilliance.

"Kamito-kun!"

Fianna opened her dusk-colored eyes.



"...Sorry for my delay."

Shielding the collapsed Fianna behind his back, Kamito turned around and said to her.

Due to his forced entrance, the arm he used to deflect the wrecking ball was now slightly numb.

"Kamito-kun... How did you know I was here?"

Surprised rather than relieved, Fianna asked with astonishment.

"Rinslet and Ellis told me. Also, I saw the flash from the spirit crystal."

Rushing to the battlefield, Kamito and Rinslet had separated to look for Fianna.

Seeing the intense burst of light, he tried to rush over here and succeeded in finding her as expected.

"...Kazehaya Kamito. The elementalist who defeated our second squad «Stahl Wölfe» huh."

The wrecking ball-wielding girl glared at Kamito with contempt.

"Are you a member of the «Sacred Spirit Knights»?"

"Alda Reed. Luminaris-sama's right hand."

The iron ball and chain rattled loudly.

"If you retreat instantly, I'll let you off for now. I'm sorry but you're no match for me alone."

Kamito shrugged and declared.

Although his divine power had not recovered completely from the battle against Valaraukar, a single opponent was no problem at all. So long as he restricted Est's power, he should be able to blade dance for several minutes.

"I appreciate your goodwill, but the «Sacred Spirit Knights» never let prey get away from them!"

"...!"

Alda Reed yelled as she launched the wrecking ball at Kamito.

Kamito jumped and dodged. Like a dance, he leaped continuously in the forest.

The shining «Terminus Est» traced out a trail of light in the darkness.

Against the background of the night, the chain twisted and turned like a snake. In this forest with poor visibility, trying to read its changing trajectories would be challenging—*Indeed, that would be the case for a typical elementalist.*

(Compared to Claire's whip, these trajectories are way too crude.)

Jumping between the trees, Kamito instantly read the chain's path.

Dodging the endlessly swinging chain by a paper-thin margin, he engaged the girl on the wall in close quarters—

Only to see Alda Reed's lips twist slightly.

(—Oh no, I made a mistake!)

Kamito suddenly realized.

Her target was not Kamito—

"This is your weakness. Male elementalist."

The chain's trajectory changed dramatically in midair, making its way to behind Kamito, towards Fianna who was watching the blade dance from the ground.

"—Fianna!"

Fianna had not even noticed the incoming attack. There was simply no time to dodge—!

Kamito threw his sword towards the air, stepped on a tree to perform a somersault, instantly squeezing the most out of his leg muscles—jumping over.

The «Instructional School»'s combat skill «Thunderclap»—making use of god-like speed, Kamito rushed before Fianna and blocked the wrecking ball's attack with his arms crossed.

"...Guh, ahh...!"

The impact made his body feel like it was about to fall apart. The sound of bone shattering rang out.

"Cough...!"

"—Kamito-kun!"

Fianna frantically embraced Kamito from behind as he collapsed on one knee.

Although he had enveloped his body in divine power beforehand, blocking an elemental waffe barehanded was too excessive.

(...That wrecking ball is completely materialized.)

The «Blade Dance» was not about mutual slaughtering without rules. Under normal conditions, elemental waffen were required to be kept in an astralized state, unable to cause physical damage to the body—

The thrown sword fell before Kamito after spinning several rounds in the air.

Spitting bloody froth, Kamito clutched the «Demon Slayer» with a trembling hand.

"...I misjudged you. To think the Holy Kingdom's knight would resort to such underhanded means."

"I am not so arrogant as to think I could defeat you in direct combat."

Playing with the «Morningstar» which had returned to her hand, the female knight spoke coldly.

"Besides, Luminaris-sama's instructions were to destroy the demon sword of darkness—"

"Demon sword...? What on earth is that about—Guh...!"

Kamito coughed blood again.

(...This is bad.)

Sweat appeared on his forehead. The impact just now probably damaged his internal organs.

"Kamito-kun, let me perform healing magic right now."

"Don't, it's unfortunate but the enemy won't give me time—"

"Of course!"

Alda Reed yelled as she threw the «Morningstar».

Dodging was not possible. The target was not Kamito but Fianna.

"You...!"

Still about to move the «Demon Slayer» with one hand, Kamito swung it upwards in one breath.

The sword's edge deflected the heavy iron ball. If used at full strength, Est would probably have sliced the wrecking ball into halves. But currently, simply deflection was already taking all of Kamito's strength.

"Hmph, how much longer can you last with one arm!?"

"Tsk...!"

Kamito clicked his tongue as he deflected the wrecking ball again.

...Indeed, he could not last long like this. Since the enemy's target was Fianna, he could not leave this spot.

"Fianna, hurry and summon «Georgios»—"

"I am unable to summon at this time."

Fianna shook her head at Kamito's call.

(...Well, that makes sense on further thought.)

The fact that she had not summoned her contracted spirit in a situation like this already indicated her inability to summon.

Did she exhaust her divine power or did the spirit suffer too much damage and had to recover?

In order to break out of the current situation, their only hope was waiting for reinforcements from Ellis and Rinslet who were fighting the dragon knight in the air—

(...They're in a desperate struggle too.)

The faint sounds of weapons clashing could be heard from afar.

The enemy was a member of the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor», a regular competitor at the «Blade Dance». Furthermore, they were fighting a flying dragon elementalist whose top specialty was aerial combat. Only through teamwork were the two girls barely able to keep up with the dragon knight.

From the way it looked, Kamito could not expect any reinforcements within short time.

—At this moment, the sound of trees falling could be heard from behind.

"...What now!?"

Turning back, Kamito found amidst the collapsed trees a massive ground dragon!

"A tyrant dragon spirit...!"

"You are the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor»'s prey!"

Riding the viciously roaring dragon was a girl in a military uniform who looked down at him.

"Kazehaya Kamito. Deceiving Leonora-sama is a severe crime!"

"What are you talking about!?"

"Talking is useless, prepare to die!"

The ground dragon roared viciously and swung its massive front limbs.

Kamito hastily used his sword to block the attack, but—

(...W-What is with this monstrous strength!)

Tyrant dragon spirits were unable to fly, but instead possessed overwhelming strength.

Even someone like Kamito could hardly block its attack with one hand.

"...Take—This!"

Even so, Kamito released divine power in his legs and endured forcibly.

However, if this continued, Fianna would be crushed behind him—

"How foolish. To even dare try beating a combat-type tyrant dragon spirit in a contest of strength!"

"Guh... Oooh..."

With a frightening roar, the tyrant dragon spirit concentrated all its weight on its claws.

Kamito's feet sank deeply into the ground as he fell upon his knees.

(...Guh, if she wants a battle of strength—)

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Kamito infused the «Demon Slayer» with maximum divine power.

Releasing dazzling brilliance, the sword sliced through the tyrant dragon spirit's hard claws.

"What!?"

The female dragon knight faltered.

(Success—!)

Continuing the momentum from slicing the claws, Kamito chopped towards the tyrant dragon spirit's neck—

"...Kamito-kun!"

In that instant, Kamito was struck in the flank, sending his entire body tumbling to the side.

"Cough...!"

His vision began to spin. His body struck a stone wall.

"Fufu, how helpful of you to seal his movements."

"You... Bitch...!"

The massive wrecking ball pierced Kamito's abdomen deeply.

"...How shocking to think he managed to take on the «Morningstar»'s attack."

"Kazehaya Kamito is my prey. Stop interfering!"

"Ara, the one who started making a move on other people's prey is clearly you."

Faced with the furious dragon knight, Alda Reed shrugged.

"Kamito-kun, pull yourself together, Kamito-kun...!"

...He could hear Fianna's cries. The voice was getting more and more distant and vague.

Color swiftly faded from his face. Many ribs were broken—

(...Damn it, my consciousness... is..."

Warm light enveloped Kamito's entire body.

Fianna was probably casting healing spirit magic. But its effects hardly amounted to a drop in the bucket. Kamito's body repelled holy spirit magic.

"Fianna... Hurry... Flee...!"

"I won't let you have your way—"

Alda sent Kamito flying with the wrecking ball again.

Sparks flickered. As his body was struck into the air, Kamito's consciousness suddenly dimmed.

(...D-Damn it... In this kind of place...)

Just as Kamito fainted, he reached out involuntarily.

—Hurry and awaken, Kamito.

He heard the voice of *her* whom he longed for.



(...Eh?)

Resounding in his mind was a comforting voice—

(...Could it be Restia?)

Opening his eyes slightly, Kamito felt intense pain all over his body.

"...-kun, Kamito-kun...!"

Thrown on the ground, Kamito could hear Fianna's desperate cries.

Then did the voice Kamito heard just now belong to Fianna instead of Restia—?

(...No, that's not right. I couldn't possibly have recognized her voice wrongly.)

Kamito searched for signs of Restia in his view.

—Then he noticed for the first time.

A one-handed sword hanging by Fianna's waist.

(Could that be the «Vorpall Sword»?!?)

There was a reason why it took him this long to notice.

The sword's body was blacker than night, seeming as if it melded into the darkness.

Although there were slight differences in its shape, it was without a doubt the demon sword of darkness Kamito once wielded in the past.

(...Why would Fianna be carrying Restia?)

Just as this question struck Kamito.

—Clang. A sudden intense pain.

This was not the result of external injuries. Instead, this was intense pain coming from inside as if his head was being torn apart.

Then—

—If you wish to obtain enough power to protect what is precious to you, Kamito, then go on and awaken.

Once again, he heard that voice.

Coming from inside his skull, her whispers—Rather it is *a voice very similar to hers*.

Bathump, bathump—Kamito felt his heart beating intensely. It was as if all the blood in his entire body was boiling.

—A great power lies dormant within you. I can release this power.

(...Wha...t... Who on earth, are you...?)

Bathump. Bathump. Bathump. Bathump. Bathump. Bathump.

His blood was boiling. All the muscles of his body began to convulse. His bones creaked noisily.

"Ah... Guh, ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Kamito-kun, what's the matter—uwah!"

Kamito roared and suddenly knocked Fianna away from his side.

"Fian...na... Stay away from me, fur... ther...!"

"Kamito... -kun...?"

Bathump. Bathump. Bathump. Bathump. Bathump. Bathump.

As the heart beat drove his sanity mad, Kamito's consciousness was consumed by darkness.

—Very well, the time to awaken has arrived. «Demon King» Ren Ashbell.

Then, *it* awakened.



"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—!"

Out from Kamito's throat came a roar like a beast's.

"What!?" "What is going on!?"

Kamito suddenly stood up, causing the two elementalists to widen their eyes.

Wielding the «Demon Slayer», he stared at the tyrant dragon spirit ahead of him with a hollow gaze.

Instantly, the massive spirit stepped back as if fearful of Kamito despite its greater size.

"Impossible! That body should not be able to move—"

The female dragon knight yelled with an expression of disbelief.

However, her sentence which resembled a scream was not finished.

Instantly closing in, Kamito swung the «Demon Slayer».

The tyrant dragon spirit's massive body was instantly sliced into two.

Its body cut into halves, the tyrant dragon spirit dissipated into the air.

"...Eh?"

The dragon knight who had been riding it fell to the ground, immobilized in shock.

She seemed like she had not understood what just happened.

"...No way... Right? With one hit, a «Tyrant Dragon»..."

Raising his great sword, Kamito ignored her and continued.

Dangling one broken arm, he advanced forward like a specter.

(...What is this power?)

The calm part of his mind puzzled.

Chopping apart the tyrant dragon spirit just now came undoubtedly out of his own will.

Driven by the impulse to destroy, he had swung the «Demon Slayer».

(What on earth, am I... Guh...)

In opposition to his lingering shred of rationality, his boiling blood yearned for battle.

"...W-What... What on earth is going on!?"

Standing on the wall, Alda Reed could not help but waver, her voice trembling.

Clear signs of fear appeared on her face.

Kamito slowly turned towards her and leaped from the ground.

"Yee—"

Alda's face distorted out of fear—

"Y-You... Go and diiiiiiiiiiiiiieeee!"

She launched her elemental waffe, the «Morningstar».

The iron chain flew haphazardly through the night sky.

However, its complicated motion looked as though it was standing still in Kamito's eyes.

Releasing divine power from his toes, he accelerated—*Running on the wildly dancing chains themselves.*

Alda's face was consumed with disbelief. As if she were saying how could this be possible—!

"Ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Entering a complete state of fearful panic, she swung the chain randomly.

But it was merely a futile struggle. Kamito ran as if his feet were attracted to the chain.

The «Instructional School»'s special combat steps, the «Demon Spider»—a technique that allowed one to stick to a surface by wrapping the soles of the feet in divine power.

However, this was a technique intended for moving through narrow passages and was not supposed to work on a wildly dancing chain. Truly god-like in execution.

Kamito jumped and landed lightly on the wall where Alda was standing.

"Ah, ahhh... Ahhhhh..."

Alda Reed loosened her grip and dropped her elemental waffe, falling to her knees.

The tip of the sacred sword pointed to the girl as her mouth opened and closed.

—Indeed, the sword was thrust towards the enemy.

Her voice resounded in his mind nonstop.

Unable to resist the impulse, Kamito raised the sword with his trembling hand.

"O-Oh... Ohhhh, oh...!"

(...No, I can't...!)

Freezing his posture with the sword raised, Kamito stopped his movements.

The opponent had already dropped her weapon and stopped resisting. Swinging his sword at an opponent like that was not allowed. However—

—No need to hesitate. You are the «Demon King».

—Commit atrocities as you desire, violate as you desire, destroy as you desire.

(...I am the... Demon... King..."

...Clang. Clang clang clang clang.

His head began to hurt again.

Every time her voice resounded in his mind, his rationality was gradually swallowed by the darkness.

"I... must... Ah, ahhh, ah... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Just as Kamito was about to swing down the «Demon Slayer»—

—Kamito!

The weight suddenly disappeared from his hands.

"...!?"

Losing balance, Kamito fell over forwards.

Poof—The one who caught him was a girl with silver-white hair.

Her petite body embraced his injured body tenderly.

Her fine hair bushed against his face.

"Es...t...?"

Kamito muttered hoarsely.

His sanity recovered just as it was about to be devoured by the darkness.

"It's okay now, Kamito?"

Est embraced Kamito's back lightly as she whispered.

Alda Reed of the «Sacred Spirit Knights» had completely lost all will to fight by this point.



Enshrouded by the silence of endless darkness—

The darkness spirit girl could feel a slight pulsation.

(Kamito, are you there?)

—Indeed, he was by her side.

However, her words could not reach him.

The connection of the spirit contract had already been severed. Even if Kamito were to take up the demon sword that Restia had transformed into, it was already too late.

(Kamito, do not listen to my voice, *I have already—*)

But her voice could not be transmitted no matter what.

Thus her lamentations were devoured by darkness, disappearing into space.

Chapter Three

Captive Claire

After taking the «Magic Stones» from the two elementalists, belonging to the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» and the «Sacred Spirit Knights» respectively, Kamito met up with Ellis and the rest.

The flying dragon elementalist instantly retreated as soon as she realized her teammate had been defeated.

Including Muir Alenstarl who had forfeited voluntarily, Kamito's team had now obtained three «Magic Stones».

Fenrir was used to take the injured Kamito and Fianna over to a nearby shrine. A large piece of cloth was laid on the floor while Kamito lay on it, with a healing stone resting on top of his broken arm.

Although Fianna's spirit magic was normally more effective, due to her current unstable state of divine power, only magic amounting to emergency first aid could be used.

"...Seriously, you are way too reckless."

"To think you would use a broken arm to blade dance, how unbelievable!"

Ellis and Rinslet both exclaimed in surprise.

Her expressions were both worried and relieved.

"Umm... I don't quite believe it myself... Ouch!"

Kamito looked down at his arm that was bent strangely out of shape.

(...Back then, what was *that* driving me?)

The voice that resounded within his mind, whose was it—?

Even though it was very similar to Restia's voice, there were subtle differences.

Rather than the tonal quality or anything of that sort, it was the personality hidden behind the voice that gave him a sense of dissonance.

(...It can't be completely unrelated to her, I guess.)

Suddenly, Kamito's gaze shifted towards Fianna who was lying beside him.

Her dusk-colored eyes seemed even dimmer. One could instantly tell she was currently very weak.

Compared to fatigue of the body, her mental exhaustion seemed even more severe.

Although Kamito hesitated over whether he should talk to her, there were some things he needed to ask.

Regarding the demon sword of darkness she was carrying.

Why would Fianna be holding on to the «Vorpall Sword»—

"Ooh, mmm..."

Probably noticing Kamito's gaze, Fianna turned towards him.

"Fianna, are you okay now?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry for making you worry. What about you, Kamito-kun?"

"No need to worry about me, these kinds of minor injuries heal fast."

"This is no minor injury okay, jeez..."

Ellis interjected with mild anger.

"By the way, aren't you two hungry? Why don't I prepare something to eat—"

"When the body is unwell, heavy meals should be avoided."

"In that case, I have a lot of canned peaches. Claire decided on her own to stuff them all in there."

Saying that, Rinslet took out several tins of peaches from Fenrir's mouth.

Hearing Claire's name, Fianna suddenly stood up.

"Fianna?"

"...I have something I need to tell you all."

Fianna turned her gaze towards everyone with a solemn expression.



After listening to Fianna's explanation—

For a moment, Kamito and the rest kept exchanging glances in silence.

...This was hardly surprising. What Fianna revealed was completely shocking.

Rubia Elstein—Claire's elder sister by blood, the «Calamity Queen» who had betrayed the Elemental Lords.

She was the true identity of the fake Ren Ashbell.

Fianna had first discovered the truth back when she was imprisoned by Sjora Kahn. Back then, it was Rubia Elstein who rescued Fianna.

"I'm sorry for keeping this from everyone all this time. Even though I had wanted to tell you earlier."

"...No, if I were in your place, I would probably have done the same."

Kamito comforted Fianna who had her head bowed down.

Ren Ashbell—the greatest enemy she had to defeat was actually her very own elder sister, of course this sort of thing could not be told to Claire.

Despite appearances, Claire was a very delicate girl. Confronted with the cold hard truth which could completely subdue her heart, she could very well lose her power as an elemental.

Fianna had kept things secret in her heart alone because Claire's keen senses might notice something if Kamito and the rest were told.

However, Claire had now discovered the truth.

(Claire...)

Kamito knew how much effort she had invested in order to see her older sister again.

The kind of thoughts, feelings and determination she embraced to participate in this current «Blade Dance».

Surely, she must have suffered an unimaginably heavy blow.

(...In a critical time, I was not able to protect her.)

I will be your contracted spirit—That was what he had promised her clearly.

Kamito silently clenched his trembling fist.

"But why would Claire's older sister steal «Ren Ashbell»'s identity to participate in this blade dance festival?"

"I don't know what her intentions are either."

Ellis inquired with puzzlement but Fianna could only shake her head.

"However, the reason why she took Claire away was obvious. In order to make her the «Darkness Queen». —For making Kamito-kun awaken as the «Demon King»."

"...!?"

—Throb. Kamito's head began to hurt again.

The «Demon King»—the successor to the «Darkness Elemental Lord» whose existence had been purged from proper history.

Like Rubia, Restia also wanted Kamito awaken as the Demon King.

(...What on earth is the reason?)

What relation did this have with her «Wish» three years ago—?

Kamito looked at the demon sword Fianna handed over.

The «Vorpall Sword» was apparently entrusted to Fianna by Claire just before she was taken away.

As for why Claire was in possession of this sword—What had transpired was unclear.

(Could it be that she was protecting Restia?)

...The demon sword held in his hand gave no response.

Even when Kamito tried infusing a small amount of divine power into it, there was no reaction. Given this kind of state, even if Restia could return to human form, she could not be used as an elemental waffe.

Kamito had clearly been searching for her throughout these three years, but now that he finally retrieved her, there was no sense of reality. The current «Vorpall Sword» was merely a symbolic representation in the form of a sword.

"We must hurry to save Claire!"

Rinslet stood up and yelled vigorously.

Normally elegant in behavior, she was now quite anxious.

...She really did worry a lot about Claire. Although the pair of childhood friends quarreled often, Kamito knew that they were close friends dating back to their childhood.

"Indeed, although we have no idea what Claire's elder sister intends, we cannot stand back and ignore when our comrade has been abducted like this."

Ellis nodded seriously and declared. She and Claire were often in opposition in the past, but by now she had come to regard Claire as a precious comrade.

"But where is Claire actually?"

Suppressing his anxious emotions, Kamito asked calmly.

The «Abandoned City Megido» was a very vast place. And covered by the sea of trees, the ruins were like a labyrinth. Searching randomly would only prove fruitless.

"Although this is only my speculation..."

Fianna nodded as she said.

"Rubia-sama will surely perform the ritual for making Claire the «Darkness Queen» here in this «Abandoned City». In order to conduct such a large scale ritual, naturally a place with powerful leylines would be selected. Thinking back, when I was captured by Sjora Kahn, she also chose an ancient shrine with powerful leylines, right?"

"But aren't the leylines in this «Abandoned City» unusable?"

"Yeah. Indeed the leylines in this «Abandoned City» have become broken and fragmented due to the past «Spirit War». But exactly because of that, it is difficult to find areas where the leylines remain intact."

"...I see."

If a piece of land contained many leylines, there would be too many choices for performing rituals and very hard to narrow down. However, within this «Abandoned City», eligible locations were very rare.

In other words, all they need to find was a place where leylines gathered and very likely it would be the place where the ritual for making Claire the «Darkness Queen» would be held—Essentially that.

"Although I can't use «Clairvoyance» at Princess Linfa's high level, I can still use it to find leylines."

Fianna turned towards Rinslet.

"Can you give me a water basin for ritual use? Also, please prepare a few jewels."

"Understood. Fenrir!"

Hearing Rinslet's command, Fenrir widened its huge jaws and spat out the luggage from the alternate dimension.

Appearing before Kamito and the girls' eyes was a massive water basin for rituals.

"—«Create Water»!"

Rinslet placed her hand on the basin and used magic to fill it with purified water.

Fianna knelt down before the basin and placed several jewels into the water.

"O Jewels, display for me where the power of the world is distributed—"

Reacting to the solemn spell, the jewels floating on the water surface began to spin rapidly.

Treating this much smaller water basin as the «Abandoned City», the jewels began to seek out locations where leylines flowed.

"How is it?"

"Please wait a moment... The «Spirit Seals»'s interference makes things hard to read."

Sweat appeared on Fianna's forehead.

(...The «Spirit Seals» are interfering with each other huh.)

Kamito glanced at Fianna's right hand.

The fire spirit seal Claire had entrusted her was carved right there.

Using the «Covenant» exchanged between royalty and nobility, Claire had transferred «Scarlet»'s spirit contract to Fianna. Hence, Fianna was currently in a very unstable state for an elemental, that of dual contracts.

"There are no active leylines nearby... Probably, much farther away..."

Widening her dusk-colored eyes, Fianna stared unerringly at the water basin.

"Places where leylines are gathered... There... are a number of them... Yah!?"

Suddenly, Fianna screamed as her hands left the basin as if they were repelled.

A tiny flame burst out from her right hand and started dancing violently in the air.

"Fianna, are you okay!?"

"Yeah... Just a bit surprised—"

"Your Highness, there's fire!"

Rinslet pointed at the water basin.

The flame suddenly crossed over to the water basin, finally focusing into a point.

"...What is going on?"

"Could it be Scarlet telling us where Claire is located?"

Hearing Kamito's suggestion, everyone stared at the water basin.

...The fire remained in one position without moving.

Soon after—

"...No doubt about it, this is Scarlet's will."

Fianna explained as she looked at the glowing «Spirit Seal» on her right hand.

"Even after the spirit seal has been transferred, Scarlet still seems to maintain some connection to Claire, the original master."

Despite being unable to manifest in the form of the hell cat, Scarlet was still trying to help out her master.

"As expected of Scarlet!"

Rinslet exclaimed in admiration as she watched the flame on the water basin.

"Well then, Your Highness, do you know where this is located?"

Ellis asked.

"This is the most eastern end of the «Abandoned City». Uh, the distance from here is—"

Fianna swiftly calculated the relative distance between the flame and the jewels.

"Based on our speed, two or three hours traveling directly in a straight line."

"Two or three hours traveling directly in a straight line..."

Kamito muttered with a solemn expression.

Fianna's conclusion was ultimately just a theoretical shortest distance in a straight line. But in actual fact, the abandoned city was a labyrinth with a sea of trees growing all over the ruins. Along the way, they could be attacked by «Forsaken Spirits» and might even come into conflict with other teams.

Although Ellis could use wind magic to fly in the air, flying continuously for hours was not possible. And alone, she could not get Claire back from Rubia's clutches.

"We must get Claire back before the «Darkness Queen» ritual is completed..."

Just as the entire atmosphere within the shrine was weighed down by a gloomy solemnity—

"All we need is a way that guarantees that we reach the destination without encountering enemies along the way, right?"

Hearing Rinslet's question, everyone turned to look at her in puzzlement.



...A dream. One that she seldom dreamt, a dream about that particular day.

"No way... I won't believe it..."

Young Claire could be heard crying her eyes out in the front gates.

"Nee-sama couldn't possibly have done that...!"

Several horse-drawn carriages were waiting in front of the gates of the massive castle built on a gentle hill.

As Claire cried, the Empire's soldiers were taking away her parents before her eyes.

After a nominal trial at the imperial capital, Duke and Duchess Elstein were sentenced to Bares Prison that was notorious for detaining political prisoners.

"...Father... Sniff... Mother... Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

As Claire cried loudly, she clutched her one-piece dress, creasing the hem completely.

But no one came to help her. All the retainers who used to act so gently were now casting ice-cold gazes at her.

Rather than compassion or sadness, their gazes were filled with hatred and derision. After the Elstein family lost their title and their lands, the daughter held no residual value at all.

"—Stand up, younger sister of the traitor."

A haughty officer violently pulled young Claire by the hand.

"That Elstein spirit contracted to you, return it to the imperial family."

"...Eh?"

"Return your spirit to the imperial family. Come on, hurry and stand up!"

"...No, no way!"

Claire shook her head and pleaded.

"«Scarlet» is my precious friend."

"Shut up! You're the younger sister of the traitor who shamed the Empire!"

The officer slapped Claire, completely without mercy.

"...!"

"Are you trying to delay me from finishing my job!?"

"I-It hurts... Yaaaaaaa....!"

Claire screamed as she was dragged forcefully by the arm.

"Hey, hold on. Getting serious with a child is just simply unsightly—"

—Suddenly someone grabbed the officer's arm from the side.

"This girl and the flame spirit shall be under my supervision for now."

"W-What did you say? Dame Greyworth!"

The officer looked at that person fearfully.

"I can sense exceptional talent from this girl. Wrecking the opportunity here would be quite a shame. If she went to study at my Academy, I'm certain she will become an excellent elementalist."

"Th-This is no joking matter! This girl is the younger sister of that «Calamity Queen»!"

"...So what? Are you objecting to my decision, one made by the «Dusk Witch»?"

With eyes as sharp as an eagle's, she glared at the officer.

"O-Of course not, if Dame Greyworth says so, how would I dare..."

The officer nodded reluctantly.

"Dame Greyworth, this will only worsen your position within the imperial palace, you know?"

Greyworth simply shrugged in response to the threat.

Once the officer and the soldiers had left, she bowed her head and looked down at Claire.

Even someone as ignorant in worldly affairs as Claire would have heard of the «Dusk Witch»'s title.

Served by a powerful demon spirit, reputed to have vanquished even Archdemon-class spirits, the continent's strongest elementalist.

"Stand up, Elstein lass."

"...!"

"Don't make me repeat myself. Hurry and get up."

"Y-Yes...!"

Claire timidly stood up.

"The parents who have protected you until now are gone. Are you ready to decide your own fate by your own will?"

"Yes—"

Young Claire was faced with a choice.

At that point in time, it was still possible for Claire to hand over «Scarlet» to the imperial family, move away to another place to hide her identity and live the rest of her life as an ordinary girl.

As for her other choice, a cruel fate undoubtedly awaited her.

—But Claire had already made her decision.

"I will see my elder sister again. To see her and to find out the truth!"

"...Very well, then become strong, Elstein lass."

Seeing something in Claire's eyes as she nodded—

Greyworth narrowed her eagle-like eyes and smiled.

—Several months after that, having already abandoned the Elstein name, Claire placed first in the entrance exams for Areishia Spirit Academy, thereby entering the gateway to success through the preparatory institution for Ordesia's prestigious families.

However, that was merely the beginning of Claire's trials.

"...Did you know? That girl is the younger sister of the «Calamity Queen»."

"Woah! Why would such a scary child be in the same academy as us?"

Mercilessly targeted by hateful and derisive gazes, Claire spent every single day in fear.

Even so, she did not run away because she had resolved herself to her goal of meeting her sister once again.

"Hey, did you know? Having a girl like you around here is very troubling."

"I-I'm sorry, but..."

"So, how about we destroy this «Spirit Seal» for you?"

"N-No, don't...!"

"What are you people doing!?"

Rinslet yelled as she rushed into Claire's classroom.

"Ara, are you trying to oppose your elders?"

"Even as a daughter of the Laurenfrost family, you are just a student like everyone else within this school."

The upperclassmen nobles mocked.

"Indeed, family background means nothing within the Academy. Let us decide the victor purely through power?"

Rinslet smiled with composure as she released a magical snowstorm at the upperclassmen.

"Woah! W-We'll get you next time!"

Leaving behind such words, the girls fled frantically.

"Rinslet-chan... Th-Thank you."

"Hmph, it's not like I wanted to help you. I simply hate that sort of people."

Rinslet blushed and shifted her gaze away.

"I-I must become stronger..."

"...Claire?"

Rinslet watched in amazement as Claire immersed herself in deep thought.

"That's right, I'll become stronger... Much much stronger, stronger than anyone else..."

Strong enough to obtain victory in the «Blade Dance», to meet up with her older sister again.

...Then on that day, three years ago, Claire met *her*.

Rather, it did not really count as meeting for Claire simply idolized her from afar.

The «Strongest Blade Dancer»—Ren Ashbell.

An otherworldly beauty, roughly the same age as her.

Love at first sight. Claire wished to become just as strong, to be able to perform a blade dance just as elegant.

In the center of the arena where confetti flew, the black-haired girl was surrounded by tremendous cheers.

The face of the girl began to overlap with a young man's face familiar to Claire—



"...Kami... to...?"

Waking up from a long dream, the first thing that entered Claire's view was a shining magic circle beneath her feet.

"This place is...?"

She saw a vast space around her.

Numerous stone pillars supported a tall ceiling. Candlesticks were lit up, illuminating walls with strangely designed sculptures carved upon them.

(Looks like the ruins of some historical site...)

Claire surveyed the surroundings with unease—

At this time, she finally remembered.

(Right... Nee-sama took me—)

The cruel truth she did not want to face.

—The fake Ren Ashbell turned out to be her own elder sister Rubia.
She had captured Claire and brought her here.

...If only I could simply treat this all as just a dream.

However, her right hand, with its missing spirit seal, pointed out the cold hard truth.

(...How much time has passed since I was brought here?)

Claire sighed in her mind.

Could night have already arrived? Since light did not reach the interior of the ruins, there was no way to tell the passage of time.

(Looks like my clothes have been changed to a priestess' garb...)

Claire gripped the long hem that dangled all the way down to the floor.

She was currently dressed in high-ranking ritual attire that only «Queens» wore.

Her twintails had been untied and carefully combed. A golden jeweled crown had been placed upon her head.

The last time she ever dressed like this was back when she was invited to participate in the «Grand Spirit Festival» at the imperial capital during her childhood.

(...Nee-sama mentioned she was going to make me the «Darkness Queen» for serving the «Demon King».)

—In that case, this ritual attire must be part of the preparations.

(—Screw that. How could I let Kamito become the Demon King!?)

She had to escape as quickly as possible—

Just as she stood up, intending to run—

"...Yah!"

Claire felt intense pain in her fingers.

"...Oh well, of course."

Claire frowned painfully and groaned.

The magic circle carved on the ground seemed to be a barrier for imprisoning Claire.

"Given some time, maybe I can dispel it."

Just as Claire bent over to decipher the spell—

"I constructed this barrier. No one can dispel it other than «Queens» equal in rank to me."

The gates to the room were slowly being pushed open.

"...Nee-sama!"

Claire held her breath.

The one who appeared was her elder sister in a scarlet mask.

Accompanied by the sound of heavy military boots, the elder sister approached. Claire glared back defiantly.

For the past four years, she had survived desperately for the sake of meeting her sister again.

—To see her and ask about the truth.

However, even though she was now clearly before her, Claire did not know what to say.

To cry, to hate or to scold—Or to express some other words. The thousands of words she had prepared for this very moment disappeared without a trace like a puff of smoke.

(...*I miss you*. All this time, I wanted to see you.)

Those ruby eyes filled with silent flames were identical to Claire's.

Except with one decisive difference.

Not simply the result of four years' passage, but an even more absolute difference.

(—Nee-sama has changed. Changed into a Nee-sama I don't recognize.)

First of all, she had to confirm this fact.

(...However, I am the same in this regard.)

Claire had already bid her young self goodbye.

Given Claire's earlier self, she would have submitted long ago.

She was only able to stand before her sister now because she was no longer the same.

(...I, as well as Kamito. And everyone else in the team.)

Hence, she was not going to shift her gaze away from the truth before her eyes.

"Nee-sama!"

—Claire finally squeezed out a voice.

Next—

"...Nee-sama, why did you betray the «Elemental Lords»?"

Claire asked as she stared straight into the eyes behind the mask.

Rubia returned her gaze head on.

"Because it is necessary. To save this world."

"...Save this world?"

Hearing her sister's unexpected reply, Claire became confused.

"Indeed, to save this world, I must vanquish—Those «Elemental Lords»."

"—Are you serious, Nee-sama?"

Claire shut her mouth in astonishment.

Has she gone mad, driven by a sense of vengeance—?

"Without the grace and blessings of the «Five Great Elemental Lords», the people living on this continent cannot start fires, cultivate the land, or even benefit from wind and water!"

"—Indeed. Hence, this world must be destroyed once."

"...!"

This time—Claire was rendered completely speechless.

Rubia's speech did not display any sense of falsehood or confusion. Her words carried relentless resolve.

Those eyes, the same color as Claire's, what on earth have they seen—

"Standing on equal footing with the «Elemental Lords» is the power of the «Demon King»—So long as that power is obtained, destroying the «Elemental Lords» is not impossible."

"B-But in that case, many spirits will be destroyed!"

The «Elemental Lords» were not only powerful spirits but also beings who ruled spirits of the natural world.

Destroying them meant that the power of spirits would disappear completely from the entire continent.

Once this happened, who knew what terrifying chaos would result in this world that was built using the power of spirits—

(...No, surely it was not only limited to chaos.)

Chaos brought distrust, distrust brought terror—Very likely, a great tragedy completely surpassing the Ranbal War in the past would result.

"Nee-sama, you are saying that causing that kind of war is necessary?"

"In order to liberate humans from the spirits, sacrifice cannot be avoided, no matter how large."

"How could that be... Nee-sama!"

Claire's fingertips touched the barrier, causing an intense eruption of sparks.

"...I have already abandoned the name of Elstein. I am no longer your elder sister!"

Rubia ended the conversation on her own and turned away.

"The ritual will start after the preparations are complete. Before that, stay there obediently."

"Nee-sama... Wait up, Nee-samaaaaaaaaaa!"

Claire's screams were drowned out by the shutting sound of the stone doors.

Chapter Four

Iseria Seaward

"—This direction leads to the underground entrance."

Under Rinslet's guidance, Kamito and the team returned the central area of the «Abandoned City» where they had fought «Valaraukar» in a deadly battle.

Avoiding the still burning flames, they entered the depths of the debris-filled historic ruins to find a long and narrow staircase leading down underground.

"...To think there was a place like this. How amazing of you to notice it."

"I was initially transported by the «Leap» to the underground maze. Also, if it weren't for this girl who led the way, I would probably still be trapped underground."

"Girl who led the way?"

"We'll surely meet her again once I return underground."

Rinslet used spirit magic to lit a light in her palm as they walked down the dark staircase.

Kamito and the rest exchanged glances and followed her down.

These steps seemed to have been built during extremely ancient times and were severely worn and eroded.

"...What a creepy place."

Ellis hugged her shoulders and grumbled.

"Ara, are you afraid?"

"O-Of course not!"

Ellis denied defiantly.

Seeing the usually stern and awe-inspiring captain of the knights display such an unexpected side, Kamito smiled wryly.

"Ooh... Kamito, what are you laughing at!?"

"Sorry... Hey, don't swing your sword in a place like this!"

"Okay, we've arrived."

Rinslet turned around the hand with light.

At the bottom of the staircase was a passageway with High Ancient script carved on the flanking walls.

"...This place too, is it a historic site dating to the Spirit War?"

"Apparently. Carved on the stone walls are names of ancient spirits."

Fianna felt the carvings on the walls with her fingertips as she spoke.

"Up ahead, there's even a wall with Est-san's name on it."

"...Est's name?"

Kamito looked at the sacred sword at his waist.

Est was a legendary «Spirit Weapon» active during the Spirit War. It was not too surprising for her name to be carved on historic sites dating back to the Spirit War.

Next, Kamito looked up to examine the walls of the passageway.

The passage was so narrow it was almost impossible to swing a sword. If they met an enemy ambush, things could get troublesome.

"Are there any «Forsaken Spirits» here?"

"Now that you mention it, I was not attacked at all."

"This place is different from the ground surface. It's filled with an air of purity. Perhaps this was a mausoleum for spirits in the Spirit War."

"...I see, a mausoleum."

In that case, it was only natural that the «Forsaken Spirits» born from the spirits' resentment would not appear in this place.

When they first heard Rinslet explain about the underground maze, everyone was still slightly apprehensive. But after considering the low chances of encountering enemies here, it should be much safer than traveling above ground.

However, there was still a huge problem.

"...So, do you know the way?"

"Yeah, no problem for sure."

"...For sure? This description makes me very worried."

"—«Fenrir»!"

Ignoring Ellis' criticism, Rinslet snapped her fingers.

The massive white wolf was summoned from empty space and opened its mouth.

Together with blowing snow, out came—

"...A frying pan? As well as eggs, flour and milk?"

Kamito frowned.

"...Rinslet, what on earth are you doing?"

"Next, I'll make special pancakes."

Rinslet held the frying pan and smiled adorably.

"...Ooh, pancakes?"

"Actually, I do feel a bit hungry."

Ellis and Fianna looked at each other.

Speaking of which, Kamito and the group only had a bit of soup and bread during dawn.

Furthermore, in defense of the young ladies' honor, elementalists easily become hungry through the use of spirits.

...Absolutely, it was not because these girls were gluttons.

"I'll prepare food for everyone later."

After putting a fire spirit crystal on the ground, Rinslet placed the frying pan on top of it.

"These are offerings for summoning a spirit."

"Spirit?"

Kamito asked in amazement.

"My savior who rescued me when I was lost underground and showed me the way to the surface."



...After that, several minutes passed.

As sizzling sounds came from the frying pan, the sweet fragrance of slightly charred butter wafted through the passageway.

While making her special pancakes, Rinslet explained the whole story about how she escaped the underground maze.

—Of course, she also talked about the incredible girl she met inside the maze.

"...A young girl spirit."

After hearing her story, Kamito crossed his arms and muttered.

According to Rinslet, a spirit with a young girl's appearance had told her how to reach the exit to the ground surface.

"Must be quite a high level spirit to be able to take on human form."

Like Est and Restia, spirits who manifested in complete human form were extremely rare, even in «Astral Zero». Of course, not all high level spirits existed in human form, but appearing as a young girl implied that she must be quite a powerful spirit.

"She really needs to be thanked properly for helping you, Rinslet."

"Yeah, so I promised her already, we'll help her leave this place."

The girl spirit was apparently sealed in this underground maze by a powerful barrier. Furthermore, she had lost virtually all her memories.

"Are you able to release this seal, Your Highness?"

"Eh, let's see..."

Prompted by Rinslet's question, Fianna rested her chin on her hand as she entered deep thought.

"I think in my current state, I will have difficulty releasing a barrier that is able to seal a high level spirit. But I will still try my best..."

"Thank you."

Rinslet bowed her head.

"However, will that spirit really appear?"

Ellis asked, a little doubtful.

"Rest assured. Even Fenrir offers undying praise for my pancakes."

Rinslet placed her specially made pancakes on a porcelain dish and sprinkled liberal amounts of honey.

"...But it is hard to imagine spirits of the highest level being enticed by food."

Ellis said, somewhat worried. Kamito agreed on this point.

(...Well, we do have a sword spirit here who loves bean curd.)

After that, they waited a while longer—

"...No one is coming."

"H-How strange."

Rinslet surveyed her surroundings, slightly taken aback.

...If this continued, her specially made pancakes were going to get cold.

"Then can I test the taste, a little bit?"

"Not allowed."

Rinslet slapped Kamito on the back of the hand just as he was reaching out to the food.

"Kamito-kun, I allow you to taste me carefully, okay?"

"Fianna, what on earth are you talking about!?"

Just as Kamito retorted—

(...?)

Glare—

He suddenly felt someone's intense gaze.

"What is it, Kamito?"

"Well, I felt someone watching just now—"

Kamito reached for the hilt of his sword as he stared into the depths of the darkness.

Twitch... Where the passage made a turn, he discovered a figure that quickly hid itself.

"...?"

Kamito rubbed his eyes.

(...I think I saw something resembling insect antennae?)

Twitch, twitch... He saw two bouncing antennae again.

"That thing, Rinslet, could that be...?"

"It's Miss Spirit!"

Rinslet raised her voice. Movements could be sensed in the darkness again.

"Kamito-kun, hurry and give chase!"

"Got it!"

Before he replied, Kamito had already started running.

The other party was also very swift in movement. But compared to Kamito when he was serious, it was nowhere near enough.

"W-Wait up!"

"Fuah!"

In the darkness, Kamito pushed his fleeing quarry to the ground. It was a little violent, but capturing this nimble fellow would be very difficult otherwise.

"W-What are you doing, you insolent fellow!"

The girl struggled desperately in Kamito's grasp.

She was apparently wearing an outfit with a very long hem. Kamito could hear the sound of clothing rubbing intensely.

"...I'm sorry! Please calm down and listen to me!"

"Noooooooooooooooooo!"

Another round of struggling.

"Kamito-san, where are you?"

"Here!"

Rinslet and the girls lit a light and ran over.

Then—

"...Kyah!" "Ahhh!" "Wha...!"

The three girls instantly froze in expression.

"...?"

Getting a bad premonition, Kamito looked at the girl he had captured.

Over there—

"Sob, sob..."

Tears glimmering in her clear eyes, the girl was half-naked with her priestess outfit pulled wide open.

"Kamito-san, what on earth were you trying to take advantage of in the confusion!?"

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

"N-No, this is a misunderstanding!"

On the floor, Kamito frantically screamed for dear life.



Chew chew. Chew chew.

The young girl dressed as a priestess was enjoying the pancakes.

On top of her hair which resembled the color of shimmering water, two antennae of hair stood upright adorably.

This girl was the spirit who had helped Rinslet.

She was definitely a powerful spirit but one could not get that impression from her at all. In a certain sense, she was an even more carefree spirit than Est.

"Please eat as much as you'd like. I've got plenty of ingredients."

Rinslet smiled as she kept tossing the frying pan.

"Thank you. Your snacks are really tasty."

The spirit girl smiled as she handed the dish over to Rinslet.

Having two younger sisters, Rinslet was especially adept at taking care of young girls. However, since this girl was a spirit, she should be actually much older than Kamito and the rest.

Suddenly Kamito's eyes met with the girl spirit.

But she immediately averted eye contact.

She seemed to be quite wary of everyone apart from Rinslet, especially Kamito.

...Oh well, I guess it's because our first encounter happened in such a terrible manner.

"By the way, Princess Maiden of Ice."

The girl paused her hand that was holding a pancake and asked Rinslet.

"Why have you returned here?"

Rinslet placed the frying pan aside and instantly sat up properly.

"Miss Spirit, in truth, I have a request to make of you."

"A request?"

The girl spirit tilted her head slightly.

"Yes. Could you please show us the way through this underground maze?"

Rinslet explained their situation to the girl.

Hearing that—

"Of course. After all, I was able to enjoy these tasty pancakes."

With honey still smeared around her mouth, the girl nodded.

"Please accept my utmost gratitude."

Rinslet bowed her head very politely.

Although many high level spirits were quite hard to please, this girl acted like a forthright and obedient child.

"Speaking of where the leylines are the most concentrated in this «Abandoned City», it should be—the «Lost Cathedral»."

"...Lost Cathedral?"

"The oldest sacrificial altar in the «Abandoned City». It was mentioned in the research materials Milla gathered."

Fianna clapped her hands together and said.

"Right, it was the headquarters of the faction opposing the «Elemental Lords» during the Spirit War in the past—"

The girl spirit nodded with a meek expression.

"You're quite knowledgeable of this place's history... But didn't you say you lost your memory?"

Kamito asked.

"I have been imprisoned here for almost three years. It's been so boring all this time so I have spent the time reading the history carved on these walls of the maze."

The girl spirit displayed an expression of despair.

"Miss Spirit, regarding this matter..."

Rinslet began to speak slowly at this time.

"Regarding the seal placed upon you, perhaps there might be a way to lift it."

"...Really!?"

The girl spirit widened her crystal-clear eyes.

"Yes. Princess, Your Highness—"

Urged by Rinslet, Fianna stepped forward.

"My name is Fianna Ray Ordesia, the second princess of the Ordesia Empire. I wish to offer the best of my humble efforts to attempt releasing the seal that binds you."

Fianna announced her name and title to the high level spirit with proper etiquette.

"..."

The girl looked at Rinslet with a troubled expression.

This spirit was really shy.

"Don't worry. Her Highness the princess is my friend."

"Rinslet's friend...?"

"Yes."

"..."

The girl spirit stared straight at Fianna—

"...I understand. I believe you."

Finally, she nodded as if resolving herself to some decision.

"In that case, may I be privy to your true name?"

"My true name..."

The girl spirit hesitated in response to Fianna's inquiry.

Rinslet suddenly understood.

"The seal placed upon you is very likely one that has a fixed and specified target. If we don't know your true name, it is impossible to release the seal."

"..."

The girl spirit remained silent for a while—

"...She is Rinslet's friend, is that so?"

Then turned towards Rinslet again.

"Yes, that is correct."

"Then I shall inform you expressly. My name is Iseria—Iseria Seaward."

"...Iseria Seaward?"

Fianna's dusk-colored eyes widened.

Kamito and Ellis could not help but exchange glances.

Because, that name was—

—Throb.

Suddenly, Kamito felt his head hurt.

(...That pain again.)

—Throb. Throb. Throb. Throb.

(...What on earth is going on? As soon as I heard *that name*, why—)

Gritting his teeth, Kamito tried to hide his pain.

Luckily, no one noticed his unusual behavior.

Everyone else's attention had been grabbed by the name the girl spoke.

"That is—"

Fianna swallowed.

"—*The name of the Water Elemental Lord*, right?"

"..."

Instantly, everyone fell into silence.

One of the «Five Great Elemental Lords». The Water Elemental Lord—«Iseria Seaward».

Her personification was generally regarded as a woman carrying a water pitcher.

Why would this girl spirit utter this name—

Her serious expression did not seem like she was joking.

"Indeed it is the name of the «Water Elemental Lord». I found that out on the walls in this place."

The girl finally spoke amidst the tense atmosphere.

"—However, back when I first woke up in this «Abandoned City»'s underground, this was the only name I could remember."

The girl spirit bowed her head, a little disappointed.

Fianna responded with a "Oh, I get it now" expression:

"Perhaps you are kin to the water spirits?"

"Yes, that should be right, I feel solace whenever I am near water."

"The kin of water spirits have intimate ties to the Water Elemental Lord. It's not that surprising for the name «Iseria Seaward» to be present in your memories."

"Other than that, I have nothing that can identify myself. To someone who has absolutely nothing, this name is my cherished treasure."

The girl spirit nodded.

"—Hence, that is why I answered with the name of Iseria Seaward."

"...I see."

Rinslet gently placed her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"So, what else can you remember?"

Kamito asked after his headache finally subsided.

"All I know is the history depicted on these walls."

"...Hmm, this might be a bit tricky."

Fianna rested her chin on her hand as she worried.

"After all, you must recall your true name in order to release the seal."

"...I ...see."

Iseria slumped her shoulders in disappointment.

"Wait a minute, Your Highness the imperial princess."

As Rinslet glared at her, Fianna frantically waved her hands and clarified.

"H-However, I will surely do my best to help. If I do some research in the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s «Biblion», perhaps I may find methods for memory recovery. Although it might take some time, if you don't mind waiting until the current «Blade Dance» finishes—"

"Don't worry. I am already used to waiting... Thank you."

Iseria looked up and displayed a sincere smile.

Then she turned around and tugged Rinslet's sleeve.

"Very well, let's go. I will take you all to the «Lost Cathedral»."



—After that, Kamito and his group followed along the dark passage.

...Drip. Drip.

"...Wah!"

Providing lighting and walking in front, Ellis suddenly shuddered. She seemed like she was frightened by the water droplets dripping from the ceiling.

At some point along the way, the walls of the passageway switched to uneven rock.

The girl spirit—Iseria was holding hands with Rinslet with great affection between them.

"...Kamito-kun."

Fianna whispered from behind at this time.

"Hmm?"

"...Say, are you really okay?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Stop pretending. Just now, you looked a bit strange, Kamito-kun."

"..."

As expected of the former «Queen» candidate princess maiden. Her senses were truly keen.

"...Well, it's much better now."

Kamito stopped playing dumb and admitted honestly.

"—I heard a voice. *Her voice*."

"Kamito-kun's past contracted spirit?"

Fianna looked at the «Vorpall Sword» at Kamito's waist.

"No, that voice... Was not Restia's. Although it was very similar."

—The beckoning voice, tempting him to awaken as the «Demon King».

Although Restia also hoped for Kamito's awakening, Kamito was certain it was not her voice.

"Somehow there's an ominous feeling to it. Restia's voice is supposed to be more soothing..."

"...Hmph, how envious."

The princess pouted for a moment then resumed a serious expression.

"The Kamito-kun who rescued me was not the usual Kamito-kun."

"...Yeah, I know."

Fianna was referring to back then when Kamito pointed her sword at the girl from the «Sacred Spirit Knights».

(...At the time, I was swinging my sword purely on destructive impulses.)

But without losing his consciousness. After all, he was still swinging his sword by his own volition.

(If Est hadn't stopped me, if I continued—)

A terrible chill ran down his back.

That *something* lying dormant within Kamito would surely awaken.

Whether or not it was the existence known as the «Demon King», who knew—

"..."

Restia did not answer.

His beloved sword, so familiar three years ago, was now nothing but a heavy piece of iron.

"Is the «Darkness Elemental Lord»'s power really lying dormant in my body?"

Kamito whispered softly to himself.

...Anyone. He wanted someone, anyone, to refute him.

However—

"Regarding that, I don't know for sure."

Fianna shook her head.

"However, I do have some ideas."

"...?"

"Kamito-kun, your body deflects virtually all of my holy magic. Perhaps the reason is—"

Fianna stopped... What she was going to say was obvious.

The darkness attribute was opposite to the holy attribute—That was what she meant.

(I am the «Demon King» who will bring ruin and destruction to the continent?)

—In the past, that was what the old men at the «Instructional School» called him.

"D-Don't worry."

Fianna spoke swiftly to cheer up Kamito from his depression.

"Umm... O-On further thought, Kamito-kun, you're already the Demon King of the Night!"

"...Uh, that doesn't really count as cheering up."

Kamito shrugged wryly.

"...Ooh. What are you two whispering about?"

Walking in front, Ellis glared back with displeasure.

"W-We're not whispering, okay... By the way, has your knight spirit recovered, Fianna?"

Kamito frantically changed the subject.

...He did not want Ellis and the rest to worry over him as well.

Fianna realized his intentions.

"Yeah, recovered to a certain extent. However, the two spirit seals of «Scarlet» and «Georgios» are mutually interfering. Let alone highly systematic ritual magic, I fear I can't even release my elemental waffe."

"That's really quite problematic, Fianna. Your elemental waffe is quite important."

Kamito commented with arms folded.

The elemental waffe «Save the Queen» was a trump card that was capable of greatly raising the team's power.

Without it, new tactics would need to be devised.

(Come to think of it, Claire has always been the one who came up with the team's tactics...)

Just at this moment—

"...Did you hear that?"

Kamito heard faint sounds of water.

Still holding Rinslet's hand, Iseria turned around at this time.

"There is an underground hot spring up ahead. One of my favorite places."

"Hot spring?"

Kamito and the girls asked at the same time.

"Well, the «Abandoned City» isn't located in a volcanic zone, right?"

"Of course it is no ordinary hot spring. The fires of war left over from the millennia-old Spirit War continue to burn underground to this day."

"Fires, several thousand years old... How amazing."

Kamito was astonished by the grand scale of things.

After walking a little while longer—

As described by Iseria, there was a massive underground lake covered with white steam.

"I never expected the «Abandoned City» to have an underground lake like this..."

Ellis exclaimed emphatically.

Intense pillars of fire gushed from the surroundings of the underground lake.

Just as Kamito and the group neared the lake surface...

"...Wah!?"

Fianna suddenly screamed.

The «Spirit Seal» carved on her right hand began to emit dazzling light, illuminating the surroundings.

"Fianna, what happened!?"

"I-I don't know either... Wah!"

Crimson flames burst out from the spirit seal and landed on the ground.

From the flames appeared—

"Meow!"

"...Scarlet!?"

It was the hell cat spirit, lit on fire.

Scarlet ran around nimbly in the cave, rushing towards the fires burning around the underground lake.

"...Scarlet has already recovered huh."

Fianna commented as she breathed a sigh of relief.

The hell cat spirit had appeared on its own will rather than being summoned by her.

"...Probably attracted by the power of flames that fills this place."

Kamito turned to everyone.

"...Well then, what are we doing next?"

Scarlet most probably wanted to store up the power of the fire here.

—In that case, it was going to take quite some time.

"As it so happens, we might as well perform purification here."

"Good idea."

"Seconded."

Ellis and Rinslet expressed support for Fianna's suggestion.

Elementalists needed to cleanse and purify their bodies in order to tap into their full power. Naturally, even as a male elemental, Kamito was no exception. Before sneaking into the «Lost Cathedral», undergoing purification was necessary.

"However, time is of the essence. We'll have to do the brief version."

"Right."

The princess smiled mischievously.

"So, in order to save time, how about you join us together, Kamito-kun?"

"N-No way I'm doing that!"

Kamito yelled with his face all red.



The great throne—«Lost Cathedral».

The tallest tower in the «Abandoned City» and the point where all the leylines converged.

It was the castle residence of the «Darkness Elemental Lord» who led the rebel armies during the «Spirit War» in the past.

For the purposes of the «Darkness Queen»'s coming, there was probably no better location.

Having finished preparations for the ritual, Rubia Elstein walked up the spiral tower.

(...When was the last time I wore these clothes?)

Instead of the Theocracy's military uniform, she was currently wearing ritual attire from her days as «Queen».

In her hand were jewels infused with darkness.

Climbing the stairs and looking out the stained glass windows that were installed with vivid colors thousands of years ago, one could survey the entire scenery of the «Abandoned City», all covered with trees.

—The «Abandoned City»'s sky was always so dim and gray even at noon time.

As if the resentment dating from the time of the «Spirit War» still lingered in the sky above to this day.

The flames of the militarized spirit «Valaraukar» still burned where Kamito and Muir Alenstarl's battle had taken place the previous night.

Crimson flames burned entire streets. Faced with this scene, past memories were momentarily awakened—

"—al... Cardinal."

A voice from behind brought Rubia back to the present.

Breathing heavily, a girl with jade-green hair was making her way to the top of the massive spiral staircase.

Lily Flame—the girl picked up at the «Instructional School» four years ago.

Rubia halted and waited for her.

Panting, Lily knelt down before Rubia.

"—Muir has disappeared from the field."

"I see."

...Not a shocking report.

After losing «Valaraukar», that girl was already written off as combat potential.

She had already completed her mission perfectly. The battle against Muir Alenstarl should have greatly stimulated the awakening of the Demon King within Kamito's body.

(...Kazehaya Kamito, you must be finding it increasingly difficult to resist the impulse to be devoured.)

Once he was completely swallowed by that impulse—the «Demon King» within him will awaken.

"Muir will come in handy in future battles. Of course, the same goes for you."

"Y-Yes!"

After destroying the «Elemental Lords», the continent was going to descend into massive chaos due to the loss of the power of spirits.

In order to conquer that type of chaotic world, overwhelming military power was necessary.

This was the most important reason behind Rubia's alliance with the Alphas Theocracy's «Murders» to gather mercenaries and users of militarized spirits.

(...A great many lives will be sacrificed. But still, overall sacrifices can still be lessened.)

If power brought forth destruction, then even greater power will be used to suppress it.

—Bathump. Intense pain throbbed in her heart.

(The time for the Demon King's awakening is fast approaching—)

The «Sacred Maiden» and the «Demon King» were opposing existences.

This body could feel the signs of the Demon King's awakening—
—Just at this moment.

ROOOOOOOOOAAAAAR!

A terrifying roar shook the atmosphere.

"...!?"

As the floor shook lightly beneath their feet, fragments of stone fell from the ceiling.

"To think there would be an enemy attack...!?"

Lily Flame cried out, greatly shaken as she looked outside the shattered window.

Then—

"That's a... dragon!?"

Blowing the grey clouds apart, a black demon dragon was flying towards «Lost Cathedral».

The attack just now was merely the demon dragon's breath.

"Leonora Lancaster's demon dragon spirit!"

"...The Dragon Princess huh. What an affront to the eyes."

Rubia grumbled beneath her mask.

She never expected the ace of the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» to launch a direct assault here singlehandedly—

The pitch black demon dragon opened up a great hole in the middle of the «Lost Cathedral» and flew inside.

"...We're being invaded."

If Rubia intercepted her personally, it should be an easy victory.

However, she currently had to perform the ritual for the coming of the «Darkness Queen».

—The flame of her life was almost extinguished.

The «Sacred Maiden»'s power could not be squandered here.

"I will intercept her. But facing that Dragon Princess as my opponent, I fear I can only buy limited time."

Lily withdrew her hand from the window and jumped down the spiral staircase.

"...Lily, I am relying on you."

Rubia nodded and continued on her way to the top level.

Chapter Five

Scarlet's Secret

...Drip. Drip.

Water droplets fell from the top of the limestone cavern. White steam swirled and rose.

Heated by the ancient flames, the underground water helped relax stiff muscles.

Although it was no time to indulge in leisure, a final purification was necessary before they assaulted the enemy's main camp. Kamito carefully washed his body as he tried as much as possible to reach peak condition.

The «Calamity Queen»—Rubia Elstein.

The other Ren Ashbell and «Strongest Blade Dancer» whose identity had been uncovered.

(...Am I able to defeat her?)

Her power undoubtedly dwarfed Kamito's in his current state. Even if he retrieved all his senses from three years ago, it was still uncertain whether he would be able to be a match—That was how things stood.

Kamito's only chance of victory lay in—

(—The Absolute Blade's secret technique, «Last Strike».)

Kamito opened and closed his fingers several times, trying to confirm his feel for the sword.

The secret technique learnt from Greyworth was Kamito's final trump card.

However, to be honest, he was not certain if he had truly mastered that secret technique.

The «Last Strike» was an ultimate sword reversal technique. Unless Kamito was facing an enemy of the same level, it could not be used.

(By the way, how strange...)

Kamito frowned and looked up at the ceiling of the limestone cavern. Even though it was now known that the true identity of the other «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell, was Rubia Elstein, there was something impossible to accept about it. Namely—

—*She was far too strong*, this simple fact.

Indeed, as a former «Queen», the total amount of divine power accumulated in Rubia Elstein's body should far surpass most elementalists. Although an abundance of divine power would not result in a decisive difference in potency, it was undeniable that people with greater reserves of divine power were able to command more powerful spirits for longer durations.

However, princess maidens serving at the «Divine Ritual Institute» basically received no combat training at all.

Hence, she was supposed to be completely unversed in swordsmanship, just like Fianna.

Rumors regarding the «Calamity Queen» as a master of the sword were completely unheard of.

The first thing that came to mind was the usage of a «Cursed Armament Seal» to strengthen the body, but even «Cursed Armament Seals» were unable to turn someone untrained in martial arts into a sword master.

(...Even an «Elemental Lord»'s miracle can't do that, right?)

—Throb. Again, the acute headache returned.

(...Damn it... What on earth is going on?)

—That pain is proof that your power is about to awaken.

The voice very similar to hers resounded in his mind.

—Very soon, you shall become the «Demon King» who brings ruin and destruction to the world.

(...Shut, up... Already... Shut, up...!)

Covering both ears, Kamito submerged his face in water.

(Shut up! Shut up, shut up shut up...!)

He yelled stubbornly in order to drown out the voice.

"—Please be calm, Master."

Suddenly, Kamito heard another voice from behind.

"...!?"

Raising his face out of the water, Kamito looked back.

A swaying figure could be seen emerging from the other side of the steam.

...Not Rinslet or any of the girls, for they should be over with Iseria, performing purification at a place a short distance away.

Next, Kamito glanced at a shaded position in the rocks. The «Demon Slayer» and the «Vorpall Sword» were both in sword form, resting against the rock.

...The figure behind the steam did not say anything more.

"...Who are you?"

Kamito intensified his tone of voice and swiftly swung his arm.

The wind pressure caused the surrounding steam to disperse instantly—

"Meow—!"

The figure emitted a strange sounding scream.

"...Wha!"

Kamito's eyes widened as he was rendered completely speechless.

Appearing from behind the mist was—

A fully wet and naked beauty.

Her body was graceful and slim like a beast's, with mildly bulging breasts. The scarlet hair was at shoulder length. For some reason, there were adorable cat ears on her head.

Rather than make any attempt to cover up her nude body that was like a work of art, the beautiful girl simply froze.

"..."

"..."

They stared at each other for a few seconds.

Then immediately, the beauty blushed before his eyes.

"Meow, meooooow!"

Frantically, she tried to flee—

Splash!

...But she ended up falling spectacularly, creating a column of water.

"...Meow, meooow... Choke, chooooooke...!"

"H-Hey, are you okay!?"

Kamito rushed over and picked up the drowning cat-eared beauty in his arms.

"Kyah, w-what are you doing!?"

"I-I'm sorry... Eh, a tail!?"

Kamito's eyes stared wide open.

Caught in his hand—a *tail seemed as if it were made of fire.*

(...W-Wait a minute? This tail, could it be...)

Kamito suddenly reacted and gazed intently at the cat-eared girl's scarlet eyes.

"...Are you Scarlet... eh?"

"M-Meow..."

The drenched scarlet-haired girl nodded with embarrassment.



Finally recovering from the initial shock—

"I am the «Scarlet Valkyrie» in service of the Elsteins—my true name is «Ortlinde»."

Transformed into a girl's form, Scarlet announced her name.

...It looked like she really was Scarlet, no mistake about it.

"...Uh, sorry. I'm a little confused here."

Kamito averted his gaze as he scratched his face.

Although they were both submerged to their necks and there was no worry that he would view Scarlet's naked body directly, Kamito still felt that the erotic lines of her neck was drawing his gaze involuntarily.

However, Scarlet did not seem like she minded.

"Yes. Well then, let me explain."

She revealed why she had changed from a hell cat to a girl.

Then—

"...I see, so your true name was released huh."

After hearing her explanation, Kamito accepted it despite his surprise.

In order for a contracted spirit to fully release its power, not only did the contractor need to be well-matched in power but the spirits had to be summoned by its true name—namely, a release of the true name.

When he first met Claire, Kamito felt a certain dissonance regarding the name «Scarlet». No matter how he looked at it, the name seemed like an alias for the hell cat spirit.

Scarlet's true name had been lost throughout the generations of the Elstein family, but for some reason, Restia who was accompanying Claire knew the name.

Then having exhibited sufficient power in the current «Blade Dance», Claire successfully released the true name. Obtaining her original power, Scarlet changed from her beast form as a high ranking spirit to recover her girl form as a spirit of the highest class—Basically something like that.

Having lost her power during the battle against Rubia and returned to her hell cat form, Scarlet had apparently retrieved enough power to regain human form temporarily as a result of pouncing into the ancient burning flames.

"By the way, umm Scarlet..."

"P-Please don't stare like that, Master."

Blushing slightly, Scarlet began to blow bubbles in the water surface.

"S-Sorry... By the way, why are you calling me Master?"

Kamito posed a simple question.

Scarlet's master was supposed to be either Claire, the original contractor, or Fianna, the current one.

Scarlet responded by gazing at Kamito with serious eyes—

"Because Master's master is also my master."

"...? But I'm always being ordered around by Claire as her slave spirit."

Kamito tilted his head in puzzlement. Thinking back upon the relationship between Kamito and Claire all this time, no matter how one viewed it, Kamito could not be described as Claire's master in any way.

"...Really?"

But this time, it was Scarlet who turned her head incredulously.

"But then there's a contradiction."

"What contradiction?"

"As you may know, Master, contractors and contracted spirits will share their dreams on rare occasions."

"...? Yeah, that's right."

Still displaying surprise on his face, Kamito nodded.

When Kamito slept, he occasionally shared Est's dreams.

However, perhaps because Est has lost the majority of her memories, the contents of her dreams always involved things that happened to her after meeting Kamito.

The only exception was during the time when Est disappeared, Kamito had witnessed the memories of her past contractor, the «Sacred Queen»—Areishia Idriss.

"Uh... In her dreams, Master always becomes your slave."

"How can that be possible!?"

Kamito instantly rejected it.

"I-I surely won't do anything like that!"

"...Really? You won't tie Master up and bully her or thrash her with a whip? N-Neither will you force her into unspeakable postures?"

"O-Of course I won't!"

...This hell cat spirit, what on earth is she talking about?

"Then in her usual dreams, are those Master's repressed desires..."

Scarlet began to murmur to herself.

"I-In any case, I am not Claire's master."

Kamito coughed and spoke.

"When calling me, using Kamito is fine."

"...I understand. Well then, let's go with this, 'Kamito.' "

Scarlet spoke with a serious expression.

...Despite such a dangerous-sounding nickname of the «Scarlet Valkyrie», this cat girl was unexpectedly polite.

"So does this mean you don't have any memories from your hell cat form?"

"That's right. Because when the hell cat form manifests, only animal-level intellect is present."

"...I see."

—In other words, it would be more appropriate to consider «Scarlet» the hell cat and this «Ortlinde» here as separate entities.

"However, I do remember..."

"...Eh?"

"That you make tasty dishes for me and gently caress my head, Kamito."

She smiled shyly but adorably.

"I-I see..."

Kamito scratched his face and turned his gaze away in response.

...Feeling embarrassed, he changed the subject.

"B-By the way, is it really okay for a flame spirit to be dipping into hot springs?"

When in hell cat form, Scarlet was supposed to hate getting water on her.

"Yes. After all, this place is filled with the power of flames. Besides, having released my true name, mere water merits no fear at all."

Scarlet puffed her chest slightly in pride.

However, Kamito did not fail to miss the subtle sweating on her brow.

"...Surely, you're just putting up a front and desperately enduring."

"..."

Finding the truth pointed out, Scarlet instantly looked to the side.

Then she slumped her shoulders dejectedly.

"Originally, I really was not afraid of water or the like. But unfortunately I don't have enough power right now. I can only maintain this state for a little while longer."

"After your true name is released, you don't stay in this form?"

"I am just barely able to manifest this form right now because of the power of the ancient flames here. The current contractor, Ordesia's princess, is probably unable to summon or use me."

Scarlet shook her head from side to side.

"The reason why I've appeared here is to inform you of something, Kamito."

With a sincere gaze, she stared straight into Kamito's eyes.

"I beg you. Please save my Master—*Rescue Claire*."

"Yeah, I promise you. I will surely bring Claire back."

...There was no need for her to beg expressly. Kamito agreed instantly.

Hearing Kamito's answer, Scarlet relaxed with a relieved expression.

Her figure began to quiver like a mirage. At this moment—

"Kamito-kun is taking so long..."

"Maybe he fainted in the heat!"

"Hmm, mmm, it's worrying..."

The young ladies' voiced could be heard from afar.

Probably worried about Kamito who had not returned for so long, they were coming to check out his situation.

"...!"

Scarlet's cat ears suddenly twitched.

"W-Well then, I shall take my leave."

"Why are you hurrying all of a sudden?"

"...Hmm, that ponytailed knight is very troublesome."

Scarlet swiftly got up from the water, turning herself into a fiery hell cat and ran away.

"...Ah yes, because Ellis keeps treating her like a fluffy toy, she hates it."

Even without her memories as a hell cat, the troublesome impression still remained.

"Kamito, are you okay?"

Ellis' voice reverberated in the cavern.

"...Ah yeah, no problem here! I'm coming out now!"

Answering loudly, Kamito put the black leather glove on his left hand.



Having finished the purification at the underground lake, Kamito and his entourage continued making their way towards the «Lost Cathedral».

Even though they were not able to perform a proper sacred purification, the divine power circulating in their bodies was replenished.

After escaping, Scarlet seemed like she had involuntarily returned to Fianna's spirit seal.

As Kamito passed on the story of how Scarlet released her true name, the girls were quite surprised.

"I originally thought she was just a powerful spirit but never expected her to be a humanoid spirit."

Ellis murmured emphatically.

"I guess I need to find Fenrir in the future whenever I want to enjoy that fluffiness."

"Hmm, what do you mean?"

"—Very soon, we are nearing the «Lost Cathedral»."

Walking in front, Iseria spoke up slowly.

"We can't invade the ruins from directly below?"

"This underground passage does not extend that far."

Iseria shook her head at Kamito's inquiry.

"Which means we have to do a frontal assault, huh?"

"However, I don't think «Team Inferno» has constructed a «stronghold». If they prioritized the ritual for the «Darkness Queen»'s coming, there should not be any leisure to build a large scale barrier."

"...Let's hope so."

Rubia Elstein was the former «Queen» once praised as the best. In the past, the isolation barriers she constructed would cover all the castles and residences in «Ragna Ys».

But for Kamito, the true source of concern was himself.

—That voice which tempted him to awaken.

The temptation was growing ever stronger.

(If I hear that voice one more time, I'll—)

He would probably be consumed by the impulse to destroy, awakening as the «Demon King» who leads the world towards destruction.

"...mito... Kamito."

Rustle. Rustle rustle. —Suddenly, Kamito found someone tugging his sleeve from behind.

"...Est?"

Looking back, Kamito found a pair of mysterious violet eyes gazing up at him with worry.

Without him noticing, Est had transformed from sword form at some point in time.

"Kamito, you're showing a scary expression."

In his surprise, Kamito found Est holding his hand gently.

"Don't worry. Kamito. You have me."

The icy hand gripped tightly.

"..."

Kamito was rooted there for a moment—

"...Est, you are the «Demon Slayer», you know."

"...?"

Est inclined her head in puzzlement.

"Supposing, if I were to become the world-destroying «Demon King», when the time comes—"

"When the time comes, I will simply become the «Demon's Sword»."

—Just as he was about to continue talking, Est resolutely refuted him.

"I am your sword. Your wish is my command—That is what I swore."

"Est..."

Kamito felt the strength of her grip tighten.

"...Yeah, you're right. Sorry."

Kamito shrugged. In this manner, he continued walking, holding Est's hand.

A while after that—

"—This is the closest exit to the ground surface."

Iseria stopped and turned around.

Before them was a wall entangled by a tree root.

"This tree root is in the way."

"Leave it to me."

Ellis swung «Ray Hawk», instantly severing the root to reveal a door with mysterious designs carved on it.

"This is one of the six doors to the «Abandoned City»'s underground—the door of «Persisting Darkness»."

Once Iseria chanted rarely heard spirit language, the carvings on the door glowed blue-white as the door opened with a low rumble.

In the darkness, a staircase leading to the ground appeared.

"I can only lead you this far."

Iseria stopped at the door.

Before the door was an isolation barrier that sealed her here.

"...Thank you, Iseria."

"You really helped us a lot."

"Pay it no heed. This is simply thanks for the pancakes."

Iseria turned towards the direction she came from.

Then she walked towards the darkness—

"S-Say..."

"Please hurry. You need to help your friend, right?"

"Once I find a way to recover your memory, I will surely return to this place!"

Towards the girl who was gradually moving farther away, Rinslet called out—

But Iseria's figure had already vanished in the darkness.

"...What an incredible girl."

The high level spirit who had lost her memory, who was sealed in the «Abandoned City», and who had reported the Water Elemental Lord's name as her own.

Full of mysteries that one had no idea how to begin solving, she was truly a strange spirit.

Next, Kamito turned towards the group.

"—Let's go, Claire is waiting for us."

"Yes!" "Right!" "Indeed!"

«Team Scarlet»'s young ladies nodded vigorously.

"Your wish—is my command."

Wielding in his hand Est who had transformed into the «Demon Slayer», Kamito led the charge and rushed forward.

Chapter Six

Lost Cathedral

"...Huff... Mmm, ooh..."

Numerous candlelit flames flickered in the darkness.

In the center of the «Lost Cathedral»'s spacious great hall, Claire was squirming her body painfully.

The ritual attire felt like it clung to her, heavy as soil. There was probably some burning incense, for she found her consciousness gradually getting hazy.

The chanting of spirit language echoed in this vast space.

Amidst the flickering flames, Rubia was performing a dance in ritual attire.

Her figure reminded Claire of the elder sister she used to admire.

"Nee... -sa,ma... D-Don't...!"

Even though she yelled as hard as she could inside the barrier, the sound was not transmitted.

The magic circle drawn on the floor glowed with eerie light as the flames on the candlesticks all rushed up high.

Holding jewels of darkness, Rubia slowly walked up the stairs to the altar.

"No... Stop it, I don't want this, to become that whatever «Darkness Queen»...!"

"This is the only mercy—"

Rubia stood before Claire, holding the jewels high as she recited the words of release.

The jewels released darkness which began to cover Claire's body.

"...What... is this...?"

"You shall now forget everything. Sleep in peace."

"No, don't... What are you doing... Nee-sama, Nee-sama!"

Her desperate pleas in vain, Claire's consciousness was instantly shrouded in darkness.

(...No, do not erase them! M-My precious memories...!)

As her consciousness gradually became distant, Claire reached out as if struggling—

Her parents and her older sister—the memories of the happy childhood she spent with them.

Rinslet, Ellis, Fianna—the memories of the comrades she had met at the Academy.

Memories of the precious contracted spirit who always stayed by her side at all times.

And last of all, the young man's face that dissipated like a dream—

"...Kami... to..."

But no one could hear those whispers leaking from Claire's lips any further.



"—Oh my, is the princess' taming already complete?"

This was the top level of the «Lost Cathedral».

Appearing out from the «True Sanctuary» before Rubia's eyes was the witch whose eyes were like a snake's.

"She has already been tainted by darkness. Sooner or later, she shall fall, completely devoured."

"For the «Darkness Queen» to be your real sister, oh what a tear-inducing tragic story."

"Do you wish to be roasted into charcoal?"

Beneath the scarlet mask, Rubia's gaze turned towards the witch, completely filled with murderous intent.

"Fufu, there's no need to make such a scary face. While you and the princess were stuck indoors, interesting things are happening. I came to report them."

Sjora smiled with a chuckle and licked her red lips.

Remaining in complete composure, the witch's attitude suddenly gave Rubia a sense of dissonance.

(This woman, she really does give off a different atmosphere compared to before—)

According to Lily's report, Sjora apparently used primitive magic to revive «Valaraukar» after it was defeated by Kaze haya Kamito. During that time, Lily had also sensed inexplicable dissonance from the witch.

"—Interesting things being?"

Casting her suspicions aside for now, Rubia asked in return.

...Now was the time for listening to the report first.

"Someone is invading this «Lost Cathedral» openly."

"If you're talking about the Dragon Princess of Dracunia, Lily has been sent to intercept her."

Considering their difference in power, chances of Lily prevailing over Leonora were microscopic. However, using the complicated terrain of the massive structure, the «Lost Cathedral», she should be able to buy some time.

"Not the Dragon Princess, but Kazehaya Kamito."

"...What?"

The expression behind the mask was slightly frozen.

Kazehaya Kamito had fought Muir Alenstarl's militarized spirit late last night in the center of the «Abandoned City».

By the time he noticed Claire was captured and rushed over this «Lost Cathedral», ten-odd hours should have passed.

(...Too fast.)

It would be understandable if he had knowledge of the «Abandoned City»'s structure, but there was no way he could have toured all the tree-covered historical sites in such short time.

In theory, it was possible to use the underground maze, but those were ruins even more ancient than the «Abandoned City» above ground—Even Rubia herself did not have complete knowledge of what lay down there. Supposing he had noticed the underground maze, getting here through them should still not be possible.

"To think even you could be surprised at times."

As if ridiculing Rubia's loss of composure, the witch smiled.

"Could this be fake information? Your mouth is untrustworthy."

"Witches do not lie."

"But they never tell the truth either—"

"What a truly untrusting princess. Please have a look, over there."

Saying that, Sjora raised a far sight crystal before Rubia's eyes.

Inside the crystal, Kazehaya Kamito could be seen traversing the forest.

Beside him, the Fahrengart and Laurenfrost girls as well as Fianna Ray Ordesia could be seen.

This was the vast forest on the slopes of the mountain where the spiral tower was located. They were most probably going to arrive very soon.

"..."

"To think there existed things that could take you aback."

The witch whispered as she giggled.

Ignoring these offensive words, Rubia contemplated behind her mask.

Time was still needed for Claire to fall completely and become the «Darkness Queen».

In the instant Kazehaya Kamito awakened as the «Demon King», unless the «Darkness Queen» to serve him was present, he would only lead the world towards destruction without achieving the original goal of exterminating the «Five Great Elemental Lords»—That was not what Rubia wished to see.

(The ritual cannot be interrupted now—)

Rubia glared at Sjora as if about to commit murder.

"Sjora Kahn. Now is the time for you to fulfill your duties as my ally."

"—Yes, you need not mention it."

Touching her moistened lips with a finger, the witch jeered.

"After all, I also wish to try out *that* which my country delivered. Why don't you concentrate on taming the princess of darkness."

Turning around lightly, she descended the tower's spiral staircase.

Watching the witch's back receding into the distance—

(Although the witch cannot be trusted, she is currently a useful tool.)

Rubia coldly remarked to herself.

(Once everything is complete, even the Theocracy's «Snake» must be destroyed along with everything else.)



Reaching the ground surface, Kamito and his group hacked and slashed their way through the forest.

It was supposed to be before dusk, but the surroundings were as dark as night. Heavy clouds were swirling in the sky directly above the majestic sight of the «Lost Cathedral» standing there.

"...This is the castle of the «Darkness Elemental Lord»."

Kamito looked up and held his breath.

Looking up at the building from the ground, he could feel the intimidating presence of the historic site that stood out from the ruins of the «Abandoned City».

In terms of appearance, the castle had numerous levels piled up into a spiral tower. Although the outer walls had steps along them, they were sealed off by numerous roots of trees.

"The leylines are activating... No doubt about it."

Fianna's sharp gaze turned towards the top of the tower.

"Very likely, Claire is imprisoned on the topmost floor. This is because this historic site's structure focuses the power of the leylines to the top of the spiral."

"It doesn't seem feasible to climb it from outside."

"There's a door over there."

Rinslet pointed out to a huge entrance that was still visible behind the gaps in a thicket.

"Okay, let's go!"

Just as Kamito's group reached the entrance—

"S-So big..."

Once again, they were intimidated by the gigantic size.

This door was far too big for human access. When the place was still used as a castle, giants undoubtedly lived inside there.

Using the front end of «Ray Hawk», Ellis knocked on the door. Blue-white sparks immediately scattered from the spear tip.

"The material is «Mithril». Furthermore, troublesome magic seems to have been cast."

"The carvings on the door seems to carry ancient magic."

Fianna murmured as she examined the great door intently.

"It deflects the power of spirits."

"Using Est's strength, I should be able to destroy it?"

Kamito placed his hand on the sword's hilt and stepped forward. «Terminus Est»'s anti-magic properties were topnotch amongst elemental waffen. It was possible that it could even break ancient magic.

"...It's probably better not to do that."

Fianna shook her head from side to side.

"Indeed, Est's power may be able to break the door. However, now is not a suitable time to use your divine power, Kamito-kun."

"Hmm, always trying to solve everything with force is not good."

"...I don't really want to hear that from you, Ellis."

Kamito retorted with half-narrowed eyes.

That said, Fianna had a point. Kamito obediently released his grip on his sword.

"I will analyze the magic. Kamito-kun, you should keep watch over the surroundings with everyone else."

Fianna raised both hands before the door and slowly recited an incantation.

"—O ancient song. Play music in response to my voice."

Fluent spirit language flowed from her lips. Instantly, the carvings on the door gave off dazzling light.

—Just in that very moment.

"...! Something is coming!"

Rinslet instantly released her elemental waffe. As Kamito and the rest looked up, a «Freezing Arrow» was shot into the air.

Crash!

With a sound like glass being crushed, something shattered in the air.

"Is that a spirit!?"

Kamito narrowed his eyes and stared into the air.

Ghosts from the Spirit War—«Forsaken Spirits», that was what Kamito expected, but he was wrong.

Appearing like a burst bubble in the air was—

Eyeballs with tentacles, monsters with only lower jaws, etc... A group of spirits with shocking appearances.

"Demon spirits..."

Demon spirits—an umbrella term for spirits who were impossible to command due to their anomalous psychological structure.

The only people capable of commanding them were elementalists with special abilities, known as «Witches».

At this time, the space where the demon spirits appeared from, its center distorted—

"Fufu... We meet for the first time, Kazehaya Kamito."

Accompanied by a seductive voice, the witch appeared, dressed in a foreign exotic outfit.

"—We meet for the first time, that is simply a meaningless greeting. Snake woman."

Holding his hand against this sword, Kamito glared coldly at the witch above.

Even if they were enemies, if an elementalist challenged him with pride, Kamito would offer respect in return. But to this witch who had used a despicable trap to capture Fianna and harmed his companions, Kamito had no need to offer any respect.

"Disappear from my sight. Or would you like to be cut down again?"

Kamito declared with an icy-cold voice, giving off merciless killing intent.

"K-Kamito..." "Kamito-san...?"

The undisguised killing intent of one who was raised by the «Instructional School» caused Ellis and Rinslet to shudder.

However, the witch endured the killing intent with composure.

"Ah yes. Right. *This is not the first time for you to meet this appearance.*"

"What do you mean?"

"Pay it no heed. Fufu, before the princess' investigation is complete, please play with me for a while—"

Sjora snapped her fingers, summoning new swarms of demon spirits from the magic circle in the air.

As the numbers increased dramatically, the swarms of demon spirits even blotted the sky.

Most likely similar to the time when Fianna was imprisoned, a summoning device belonging to the «Lost Cathedral» ruins was being used.

"...These numbers are bad news!"

Rinslet drew her bow and released arrows, piercing multiple demon spirits, but this amounted to nothing but a drop in the ocean.

"..."

Kamito glanced over at Fianna on the side. Fianna seemed like she was still concentrating on releasing the door. Who knew how much more time she would need—

"I'll clear them out in one go."

Kamito drew out the «Demon Slayer» and held it in a reverse grip.

Absolute Blade Arts, Third Form—Shadowmoon Waltz. This was a wild form of sword skill that could kill large numbers of enemies at once.

However, a hand reached out from the side and held down Kamito's arm.

"Kamito, leave this to us."

"Ellis... But—"

"We are a team. Members in a team have their individual missions. Your mission is to rescue Claire."

Ellis' ponytail swayed as she stepped forward.

With a swing of «Ray Hawk»—the incoming demon spirit swarm was completely sliced into halves.

"—Kamito-san, you must succeed in saving Claire."

Rinslet also stood by Ellis' side, pulling the magical bow of ice taut.

The two girls' eyes showed strong resolve.

Kamito—

"...I understand. I'll leave you two to handle Sjora."

Nodding lightly, Kamito released his hand from the sword.

"However, don't force yourself too much, both of you."

"Yes." "No need to worry."

Ellis and Rinslet nodded together.

"—The door's seal has been released!"

Fianna cried out at the door.

Rumble... Rumble rumble rumble... Rumble rumble rumble rumble
rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

As the carvings on the door gave off intense light, it opened slowly with a great rumbling.

"Ellis, Rinslet, we're depending on you to handle this location!"

Kamito took Fianna's hand and rushed into the doorway at once.

"—Oh my, don't go escaping."

Sjora Kahn jeered as she prepared to direct the demon spirit swarms.

In that instant—

"Sjora Kahn, your opponent is—"

"Us!"

Ellis produced a tempest from her spear while Rinslet's ice arrows descended like a storm.

A technique of combination magic using elemental waffen—«Ice Storm».

The howling tornado of icy wind devoured both the witch and her minions the demon spirits—

Hearing the great door slam shut behind him, Kamito rushed up the stairs of the historic site.



After the door shut behind them, the howling sounds of the ice storm stopped. Instantly, there was silence.

Appearing before Kamito and Fianna was a massive spiral staircase extending upwards. However, the spiral was distorted in several places in the air, producing a structure that resembled an infinite loop.

"Claire should be imprisoned on the top floor, right?"

"Yeah. In order to carry out the ritual, it can only be there."

Fianna nodded.

(...Right now, I can only keep going, trusting Ellis and Rinslet.)

Even though he still worried about what was happening outside the door, Kamito started to climb the spiral staircase.

Because the staircase made sharp turns in the air in several places, it muddled the sense of gravity. However, there was no confusion as to which way was up. In any case, they should not get lost.

As Kamito worried about Fianna's lack of stamina, he rushed ahead in front.

After running like this for a while—

"Huff, huff... Kamito-kun, say, is your body okay?"

"Yeah. I still have plenty of strength."

Kamito nodded as he ran. In actual fact, all the fatigue from his battle against «Valaraukar» had already been swept away. The underground lake where ancient fires burned was a purification site of extremely high spiritual quality.

"You really do have extraordinary recovery powers as usual. However, that wasn't what I meant."

"..."

Kamito reduced his running speed.

Looking back, he found Fianna gazing at him with worried eyes.

(...Looks like I can't dodge the issue.)

"...That voice, can you still hear it?"

"Yeah, right now... There's no problem."

"Kamito-kun, perhaps it would be better if you handed the demon sword over for me to safekeep for now."

Fianna glared coldy at the «Vorpall Sword» hanging at Kamito's waist.

"This is simply intuition, but that sword... Somehow I get a dangerous feeling."

"..."

The intuition of the princess maiden and former Queen candidate could not be ignored.

Kamito understood that, however—

"...I've said it already. The voice tempting me to awaken is not Restia's."

Wearing the leather glove, his left hand clutched the hilt of the «Vorpall Sword».

His past partner still offered no response. The «Spirit Seal» remained silent.

—Even so, Kamito still believed in her.

"I never want to let go of Restia ever again."

"I know that darkness spirit is a very important existence to you, Kamito-kun, but—"

Kamito placed his hand on the head of the worried princess.

"Let's make a promise. I won't become that «Demon King» or whatever."

"Kamito-kun."

Fianna bit her lip hard.

"...Understood. I believe in you, Kamito-kun."

Finally, she sighed and nodded.

"Sorry, I said something stubborn."

—Next, they continued running up the stairs without saying a word.

Soon after, the path stopped as they reached a massive floor with a ceiling.

"It's the second floor..."

"From here onwards, it looks like we can't just rush ahead recklessly."

Kamito raised a spirit crystal for illumination and surveyed the depths of the dimly lit floor.

On the far wall were six decorated doors, equally spaced apart.

"Which door leads to the top floor?"

The «Lost Cathedral» was a historic site dating back to the Spirit War. Based on the wondrous structure of the staircase just now, this place was constructed for spirits to reside rather than in consideration for humans. This was related to the design principles of spirit engineering that Areishia Spirit Academy had imported.

(...In other words, this is a building highly unsuited for humans.)

Kamito sighed in his mind. Trying to seriously tour the entire place would take forever.

"Let's simply break all the walls?"

"I think that would take forever instead."

Fianna shook her head and took out a metal lock from her bosom.

"Let me check each door for the flow of the leylines."

"This would also take some time... But that's all we could do."

Just as Kamito nodded—

"Yah... Hot!"

Suddenly, intense flames gushed out from Fianna's spirit seal on her right hand.

The flames spun in midair and transformed into a flaming hell cat.

"...Scarlet?"

Fianna murmured with a shocked expression.

...Apparently, Scarlet had manifested by her own will rather than being summoned.

Landing on the ground, Scarlet nimbly ran towards the depths of this floor. Kamito expected her to linger and circle in front of the six doors, but Scarlet raised her tail in front of the door carved with patterns of flames.

"Maybe that leads to Claire's location?"

"Meow—!"

Scarlet raised a front limb lightly.

"How could this be possible? To track down Claire's divine power even when the contract had been nullified."

"As expected of Scarlet."

Exclaiming at the same time, Kamito recalled the red-haired cat girl.

The «Scarlet Valkyrie»—Ortlinde. Even though she did not retain her memories from her hell cat form, Kamito could feel how she misses her master Claire based on Scarlet's current movements.

"We're relying on you to lead the way, Scarlet."

Kamito and Fianna were making their way across the floor when—

Accompanied by an astounding noise, suddenly, *the ceiling collapsed*—!

"...Est!"

Kamito instantly drew the «Demon Slayer» and chopped apart the massive falling stones.

Standing upright to protect Fianna, he chopped away at the scattered debris.

Rumble. Massive stones shattered into pieces. Instantly, a dust cloud filled the air.

"Cough, cough cough... Fianna, you okay?"

"Ah, yeah..."

Exhausted, Fianna sat on the ground, resting against Scarlet.

"...What happened?"

Kamito looked up—

A huge hole had suddenly opened up on the ceiling.

And down below, a massive object was writhing restlessly.

As the flying dust cleared, Kamito finally saw its figure.

"That is..."

With numerous roots squirming around, a tree monster in pain.

"...Lily Flame's «Titania»?"

The spirit that had caused Ellis much suffering through the numerous poisons it produced in its body.

However, the demon tree spirit's life was currently like a dying candle in the wind.

(Who could have done this...?)

The answer to the question descended from above.

As if delivering a final blow to the suffering demon tree spirit, a massive black body landed on it.

"...Dragon!?"

A massive demon dragon with teeth of steel and jet black scales had appeared.

The demon dragon's sharp claws swiped at the tree, completely preventing it from moving.

ROOOOOOAAAAAR!

With a fearsome roar, the dragon released a heat beam from super close range.

The demon tree spirit instantly caught on fire and dissipated into particles of light.

(What astounding power...)

Just as Kamito trembled in his heart—

"...Hmm, this is the end, is it..."

From the demon tree spirit's massive flower bud, a girl crawled out.

Red eyes and beautiful jade-green hair. She was «Team Inferno»'s Lily Flame.

Having lost her contracted spirit, she collapsed on the floor without seeming to offer any intention to resist.

And towards her—

"...Jeez. How troublesome to handle."

A girl's voice, very familiar to Kamito, reverberated throughout the entire floor.

Chapter Seven

Blade Dance of the Dragon Princess

Jumping down from the demon dragon's head was a female knight dressed in the military uniform of the country of dragons.

Black hair neatly trimmed to shoulder length. A white beret on her head.

The «Knights of the Dragon Emperor»'s strongest ace—Leonora Lancaster.

Gazing down at Lily collapsed on the ground, Leonora shrugged slightly.

"Amazing of you to fight me to this extent. Commendable."

"...!"

Despite receiving praise, Lily could only bite her lip in chagrin.

"...A thousand apologies... «Cardinal»..."

Leonora offered a knight's salute before taking away Lily's «Magic Stone».

Having lost her «Magic Stone», Lily's body disappeared as particles of light.

An imposed transfer to «Ragna Ys» through teleportation magic.

Without saying a word, Kamito could only watch silently.

Because tainting another elemental's blade dance through interference was contrary to etiquette.

"Okay—"

Then Leonora turned towards Kamito.

Naturally, she noticed Kamito's group.

"Kamito, did you come here aiming for the same prey?"

"..."

Despite the familiarity in Leonora's opening remark—

Kamito understood very well.

Leonora Lancaster's true nature was like a ferocious dragon.

Noble-minded and elegant, fully of chivalry—and above all, loyal to her combat instincts.

Leonora's black eyes gleamed with delight.

She was like a dragon that had found its ideal prey.

(...However, she doesn't look like she's currently being controlled by «Dragon Blood».)

Kamito groaned to himself.

—Very likely, she was going to be even tougher to handle than during their last battle.

An elemental's intuition told him.

"You have come here to defeat Ren Ashbell as well?"

"Yes, because she is the most powerful prey in the current «Blade Dance» festival."

Leonora nodded.

"Then I have a suggestion—"

Kamito decided to try his luck and request they work together, however:

"However, that prey is slightly less attractive than having a blade dance with you."

"...!"

Leonora released a battle aura that instantly caused shudders down Kamito's spine.

The demon dragon «Nidhogg» proceeded to moan softly, its ferocious eyes flashing brightly.

Then—

"—Divine soul of the jet black evil dragon, turn into the power in my hand!"

Heeding Leonora's call, the dragon spirit «Nidhogg» transformed into a massive sword whose length equaled her height—the «Dragon Slayer» elemental waffe.

(...Negotiations won't work, apparently.)

Left without a choice, Kamito readied the «Demon Slayer».

As much as he wanted to save Claire as quickly as possible—

Perhaps due to the battle against Lily, Leonora's fighting spirit was roused to a maximum.

This wild dragon probably could not be brought under control without a fight.

(...Besides, I already promised her.)

—The next time we speak, we will have a blade dance together.

Back then, Kamito had indeed agreed to her proposal.

The «Blade Dance» stage was where blade dances were performed as offerings by elementalists with their respective «Wishes» on the line. One was not supposed to evade battle when faced with direct challenges.

"Kamito-kun..."

Worried, Fianna grabbed Kamito's sleeve.

"Don't worry. It'll be over quickly."

Kamito stared at Leonora before him as he spoke.

Naturally, this did not imply that Leonora was easy to defeat. What Kamito meant was that this blade dance was a clash of strength rather than a contest of skill, hence it was going to be a quick decisive match—That was what he was trying to say.

(...In that sense, I must thank Leonora.)

If Kamito had to face Lily who was skilled in taking advantages of openings, surely he would be dragged into a rather lengthy and protracted battle.

"...I understand."

Fianna swiftly moved towards the wall.

Scarlet simply sat obediently in front of the door.

"—This is it, Leonora."

Facing Leonora, Kamito infused divine power into the «Demon Slayer».

"I have no intention of engaging in a graceful blade—Let's attack with full strength on the get go."

"—As you wish, Kamito."

The strongest ace of the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» smiled happily.



"Captain, are you still able to continue?"

"Of course. Do not underestimate a Fahrengart knight."

Rinslet's magic bow produced a rain of hailstones while Ellis' gales blew intensely. The blade dance performed at the entrance of the «Lost Cathedral» was intensifying.

"Dragon king of ice who sleeps in a prison of frost, release your breath—«Breath of Ice»!"

Yelling loudly, Rinslet released an arrow.

The magical ice arrow's payload of wide area spirit magic exploded in midair. All the demon spirits appearing in the air were frozen.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

At the same time, Ellis swung «Ray Hawk» as she flew in the air using wind magic.

The massive ice block shattered along with the demon spirits trapped within.

"Fahrengart style of the spear—«Flash Blossom»!"

As Ellis landed on the ground, only shattered fragments of ice remained fluttering in the air.

"Hmph, Laurenfrost snow never stops!"

Rinslet declared proudly as she tossed her platinum-blond hair.

"Pay attention. Carelessness is your bad habit."

"S-Shut up!"

Ignoring Rinslet's raised eyebrows, Ellis turned to face Sjora.

Although the demon spirit swarm was not completely wiped out, its numbers had thinned greatly.

However, the witch continued to smile with composure.

"Do not look down on us, Sjora Kahn."

Ellis readied «Ray Hawk» and gathered wind around the spear tip.

Rinslet also nocked a new arrow of ice and aimed at the witch.

"We lost in the past, but given our current selves, keeping you occupied here is within our ability."

"...Hmph."

Sjora placed a fingertip on her lip and jeered.

"...!"

The repulsive smile sent chills down one's back.

"—Just so you know, it was intentional."

"What are you talking about?"

"I am saying that I intentionally allowed Kazehaya Kamito to go first."

Snickering—the vivid red lips twisted into a crescent.

Her sheer silken garment fluttering lightly, Sjora walked amidst the demon spirit swarm.

"As for me, I'm completely uninterested in that woman's plan. A *completely ignorant and tragic princess*—At the very most, she is going to simply die while cursing the world."

"...What are you talking about?"

"Me, I simply want Kazehaya Kamito—the «Demon King»'s body. That's all."

Sjora raised her arm in the air and began to chant to summon a contracted spirit.

"...Tsk, are you intending to transform into «Ren Ashbell» again?"

Ellis clicked her tongue disapprovingly. Sjora Kahn's contracted spirit, «Baldanders», possessed the power to copy a target's appearance and abilities. Once summoned, things would get quite challenging.

"You're not going to have your way!"

Rinslet instantly released a shower of ice arrows—

However, the descending ice arrows were successively blocked by the swarm of demon spirits.

"...Damn it!"

In that case—Thinking that, Ellis held «Ray Hawk» and charged.

—However, it was a step too late.

A massive magic circle appeared above Sjora's head.

A plain white hand appeared out from the air.

"...Not «Baldanders»!?"

Ellis' eyes of sienna were staring wide.

At the same time, her instincts could feel it. —*This was a dangerous spirit.*

"Fufu, once in the «Demon King»'s service in the past, one of the seventy-two spirits—"

Sjora's mouth lightly whispered its true name.

"The one who takes everything by force—«Bandersnatch»."



The sound of ceiling fragmets falling down signaled the beginning of the blade dance.

(—Decide the match in the first stroke.)

Holding the shining «Demon Slayer» in one hand, Kamito took half a step sideways.

The fastest flash. Absolute Blade Arts, First Form—«Purple Lightning»'s form.

The wind from Leonora's sword swept up debris as she charged. Raising the «Dragon Slayer» overhead in preparation for a downward chop, she intended to decide the victor with a one-hit-kill just as she declared.

Leonora's elemental waffe was a massive sword, unsuited for turning back for defense.

Using it preemptively in a charging assault was the logical thing to do.

(If I get hit directly I'll probably get blown away in one hit.)

The pressure bursting from the sword made Leonora seem like a completely different person compared to before. Even back when she was rampaging from the «Dragon Blood»'s effects, Kamito did not feel such an intimidating presence from her.

Probably because she was no longer confused? Something had changed her sword.

Kamito could not be sure what the actual reason was.

(...However, I can't lose either!)

Just as the wind from the sword swept across the top of his hair, in that very instant—

Kamito took a step with explosive power from his legs.

"Absolute Blade Arts, First Form—«Purple Lightning»."

A flash of the blade akin to lightning.

Its true essence—nothing but a *simple straight thrust*.

Even so, it was a technique that reached an entirely different dimension when taken to the limit.

In a battle against an elemental, it could be described as a one-hit kill. In the first match during the «Blade Dance» three years ago, this was precisely the move that struck down Velsaria and the «Silent Fortress» with one strike of the sword.

(—Success!)

Evading the front tip of the massive sword by the slimmest of margins, Kamito followed his momentum to crash towards Leonora's chest.

As sparks flew from the friction between steel, then—

(—What!?)

An acute metallic noise rang out.

The trajectory of Kamito's sword was deflected slightly by an invisible obstacle.

(—Protective spirit magic!?)

Kamito clicked his tongue mentally.

Very likely, she had cast it when charging.

(...She swept up the debris cunningly to avoid her chanting from being detected?)

Although spirit magic with the dragon attribute was hard to control and not very versatile, it was the strongest class in terms of physical enhancement of the body. Also, rather than covering the entire body, it achieved its effects by shrinking the defensive area or raising its strength to the maximum limit.

For example, had Kamito aimed for her throat instead of her chest, the match would be over already. However, Leonora saw through his target most splendidly.

Instincts built from a solid foundation of experience—Indeed she was an elementalist among the best of the best.

Although the deflected slash swept over her shoulder, Leonora continued to charge and collided using her entire weight.

Crash—the blunt sound of violent impact between bones was heard.

Kamito's body was sent flying, crashing into the ground a distance away.

Leonora should have experienced the same impact but did not seem injured at all. This was because a contract with a dragon spirit conferred physical reinforcement upon her body.

(Hmm...)

Finding his vision shaking violently, Kamito had apparently suffered a concussion.

Even so, Kamito was still able to discern the approaching danger and swiftly jumped aside.

In that instant, the «Dragon Slayer» swung down. The instant the floor made of spirit crystal was struck by the tip of the sword, sparks flew and the floor shattered like glass.

«Terminus Est» was surely capable of enduring a blow from the «Dragon Slayer», but the wielder Kamito was a separate matter. He had no wish to engage in a battle of pure strength against a dragon elementalist whose body was physically strengthened.

"Kamito-kun!"

Fianna's scream was heard.

Following the momentum of his sideways leap, Kamito stepped on the wall, took a somersault and readjusted his stance.

Although Leonora's arm strength was immense, allowing her to swing the massive sword freely, the downside to these highly destructive single strikes was the great range of motion required for the swings.

—Taking advantage of the momentary opening, Kamito instantly charged.

(This will work...!)

His gaze met with Leonora who was about to swing her great sword.

Turning the hilt that was carved with a dragon towards him—

(...!)

A certain thought flashed through Kamito's mind.

The instant before he stepped into the opening, he shifted his center of gravity slightly.

Immediately, a crimson heat beam was fired from the dragon carving.

The heat beam flew over Kamito's neck, destroying the wall behind him completely.

"...So it's capable of a trick like that!"

Giving no time for a breather, the «Dragon Slayer» swept horizontally.

The intense wind from the sword caused Kamito to lose balance.

Leonora did not miss the excellent opportunity. Instantly, she shifted her grip on the sword's hilt and swung it up high.

"Yes...!"

"...!"

At this distance, even if Kamito could dodge the sword itself, he would still be smashed by the shockwave—

(...Please endure this for a while, Est!)

Kamito infused maximum divine power into the «Demon Slayer» and blocked the hit.

Light flashed past. The impact sounded as if the noise would rupture eardrums.

"Gah... Ohhhh...."

Kamito barely managed to block the sword.

"It's not... Over...!"

However, Kamito was pushed down by the momentum.

"...This, monstrous strength...!"

"Hoho, I'll take that as a compliment."

Amidst the crossed swords, Leonora's bright red face pressed near before Kamito's eyes.

It was an expression filled with utter enjoyment of this blade dance.

Watching her pure and innocent expression, Kamito felt as though he would be mesmerized in an instant.

"I have never had such a rousing and exhilarating blade dance before, Kazehaya Kamito."

"I am honored to hear that."

Kamito relaxed the tension in his face and smiled wryly.

"You're rather composed here. But even for you, reversing this unfavorable posture would be—"

Halfway through her sentence, Leonora's face froze.

An intense flash of light was being generated from Kamito's leather-gloved left hand.

A short sword of steel manifested in that hand.

This was the only spirit magic that Kamito knew, «Weapon Forging».

With a flash of the short sword's blade, Kamito slashed lightly through Leonora's fingers which she was using to grip her weapon.

There was no bleeding because physical damage was instantly converted into psychological damage. However, the pain caused Leonora to frown and weakened the sword's force slightly.

Instantly, Kamito parried the sword to the side and escaped from his position of being pressed down. Then—

"Because this does not belong to orthodox swordsmanship, Greyworth used to correct me—"

Holding the short sword and the «Demon Slayer» in his left and right hands respectively, Kamito explained.

"I actually started out as a dual wielder!"

"Hmm..."



Crashing towards Leonora's chest while she was still off-balance, Kamito made sharp slices with the short sword. As soon as Leonora switched to defense, he immediately attacked using the «Demon Slayer».

As sparks flew and scattered from the exchange of offense and defense, it looked like a magnificent dance to an observer—hence that was why duels between elementalists were known as blade dances.

Then the brief dance finally approached its conclusion.

"—O demon dragon «Nidhogg», unleash your wrath in my sword!"

Heeding Leonora's call, the «Dragon Slayer»'s blade shone brightly.

"Magical equipment release—«Balmung» is its name!"

"Unbelievable, magical equipment release...!?"

Kamito's eyes widened.

Magical equipment release—In other words, an elemental waffe's release of its true name. Depending on the type of the spirit being used, a contracted spirit's normally restrained power could be unleashed all at once.

The howling winds of the sword instantly vaporized the short sword created by «Weapon Forging» and even pushed «Terminus Est» back.

Leonora was surrounded by a golden-colored tornado.

—No, that was not wind. Rather, the burgeoning divine power was being released from all over her body to an extent that was visible to the naked eye.

(She's gambling everything on this move to decide the battle huh—!)

The initial exchanges were all undertaken in preparation for this move, because activating the magical equipment release required rousing the elemental waffe through a blade dance.

(...However, magical equipment releases are extremely dangerous.)

Releasing restraints was synonymous to letting a spirit go into a berserk state temporarily.

Expanding divine power gushed from Leonora's surroundings. This was proof that her demon spirit was forcibly releasing divine power.

In this kind of situation, even someone of Leonora's caliber could not sustain this for long.

"You said you hoped for a swift duel, Kazehaya Kamito!"

Leonora lifted the «Dragon Slayer» above her head. Its rumbling howls became even louder.

"This is my strongest sword—"

"Fianna, protect yourself well!"

Kamito shouted out hastily.

Even though Leonora had no such intentions, it was currently very easy for Fianna to get caught up into things.

(If possible, I want to save *that move* for the last, but...)

Kamito knew he would be defeated unless he went all out. In that case—

(Est, I'm relying on you!)

—Yes, Kamito. I am your sword, your wish is my command!

Kamito heard Est's voice in his mind.

At the same time, the «Demon Slayer»'s blade gave off light several times brighter than usual.

Kamito took half a step to the side and quietly stayed still as he waited for Leonora's next move.

The posture he took was that of a counterattack, the strongest anti-elementalist form.

In her current state, Leonora was fully adequate as an opponent. This was an excellent opportunity for Kamito to test if he had truly mastered his understanding of Greyworth's secret technique.

To take on the strongest sword head on.

Were he to lose here, it implied that Kamito could not hope to defeat Rubia Elstein.

"—O dragon, devour my body and unleash your wrath!"

Leonora roared.

«Balmung» shone with golden splendor as it chopped right down at Kamito—

In that instant, Kamito took action.

The secret technique of the Absolute Blade was no ordinary sword counter. One needed to sense the flow of divine power in the incoming attack and synchronize with the flow while engaging in the blade dance—Its true essence could be described as closer to a princess maiden's ritual dance performance in comparison to a blade dance.

Then—

(In the instant the blades clash, cut the *root* of the flow—)

Rather than relying on vision, one had to see through by feeling.

A failed activation of the technique would lead to nothing but defeat.

The «Demon Slayer» and the «Dragon Slayer». The two swords collided with each other.

A flash of light erupted—Kamito was able to see within it.

The root where the flow of divine power was concentrated.

"Absolute Blade Arts, Final Form—«Last Strike»!"

An instantaneous flash of the sword shattered the «Dragon Slayer» and skewered Leonora.



A blade dance between elementalists of the highest class.

In terms of time, it was so brief that it did not even last a minute.

However, Leonora's face displayed satisfaction as she lay collapsed on the floor.

"Kamito, thank you..."

Panting, her chest heaving up and down, Leonora still smiled.

"...For a most splendid blade dance performed together with you."

Caught unaware by her sincere smile, Kamito felt his heart racing.

Apparently, Leonora no longer had the strength to stand up. Nevertheless, for her to maintain her consciousness after being struck by the Absolute Blade's secret technique, she truly lived up to her reputation.

(...Oh well, it can't really be considered complete.)

While his gaze was drawn to his numb right hand, he breathed a sigh of relief for her safety.

Indeed, the very instant before he unleashed the secret technique, Kamito had slightly loosened the strength of his fingers' grip.

As a result, the secret technique was not performed in a complete manner.

He did not inflict a critical wound on Leonora because—

"Kamito..."

Leonora spoke up at this time.

"My «Magic Stone» is kept in my bosom. As the winner, please take it."

"In your bosom!?"

Kamito could not help but find his gaze drawn to Leonora's two massive bulges.

At the same time, he recalled something else.

During the «Water Elemental Festival» before the finals, Kamito had stared directly at her naked chest due to unavoidable circumstances.

"D-Don't be an idiot, how could I take it out like that!?"

Frantically, Kamito shifted his gaze away.

"Last time, weren't you searching my chest once?"

Leonora pouted angrily.

"Ah, that time, yeah, uh..."

Just as Kamito stammered...

"Hey Kamito-kun, what is the meaning of this chest searching?"

"Meow—?"

"...!"

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

Kamito looked back apprehensively to find the imperial princess bearing a lovely smile.

...For some unknown reason, Scarlet also seemed to be getting angry.

"No, that... A-Anyway, putting that aside, could you get out a «Healing Stone» instead?"

Kamito frantically changed the subject.

"..."

Fianna continued to glare at Kamito with an icy-cold gaze.

"Geez, you're hopeless."

Nevertheless, she took out a «Healing Stone» from her bosom and handed it to Kamito with a sigh.

But rather than using it on himself, Kamito gripped Leonora's hand around it.

"W-Wait a minute, Kamito-kun?"

Fianna jumped in fright.

Given the weight restrictions of the blade dance festival, the «Healing Stone» was a precious recovery tool. Handing it over for an enemy team's ace to use was outrageously unwise.

"Kamito, what is the meaning of this?"

The one most confused was Leonora herself.

"Are you pitying me?"

She stared sharply at Kamito.

"No, that's not the idea."

Kamito shook his head and refuted.

"Sorry, Leonora, but I have a request for you."

This was precisely the reason why Kamito had held back the instant when he unleashed the secret technique.

Bending over, Kamito whispered by Leonora's ear.

...After listening, Leonora:

"...Don't worry about it. Consider it my return gift for your blade dancing together with me."

She nodded, still lying on the ground.

"Much appreciated."

Kamito stood up and faced Fianna.

"—Thank you for your patience. Let's go now."



"...Guh... Oooh, ooh..."

Imprisoned, Claire's body was being devoured by darkness as she struggled stubbornly.

Very soon, the cries of the newborn «Darkness Queen» shall be heard.

"...Amazing. To think you still have the willpower to resist."

Dressed in a pure white ritual outfit, Rubia Elstein exclaimed in admiration.

A specially trained princess maiden might fare differently, but one would expect a rapid fall when corroded by this large amount of darkness.

"—As expected of the Elstein's bloodline."

"...Who are you? Why are you doing this, doing something so cruel!?"

Claire cried out persistently as if in a dream. Apparently, her memories were already mixed up or eliminated. Even when she saw Rubia's face, Claire no longer recognized her elder sister.

Unfazed, Rubia continued chanting a spirit language prayer.

This was a blessing for princess maidens who were chosen as «Queens».

However, instead of using one of the «Five Great Elemental Lords», the name woven into the blessing was of the Darkness Elemental Lord «Ren Ashdoll» whose existence had been purged.

"I hate this... No... Don't want..."

"Rest assured. You'll feel a lot better once you fall."

Whispering gently, Rubia stroked her younger sister's red hair.

Back when Claire was young, this was how Rubia lulled her to sleep whenever she was crying.

The darkness continued to devour Claire's memories—whether memories of pain or happiness, all were treated equally.

Rubia did not think this could make up for what she had done to Claire.

Even so, she wished to grant her younger sister some sense of solace.

"—Will come, that person will come."

"...?"

"—That person, surely... Will come to rescue me."

Claire's soul-less eyes once again lit up with brightness.

Rubia was taken slightly aback.

(...Who is she talking about?)

Her memories related to Kazehaya Kamito should have been erased already.

Claire and Kamito encountered each other at the Academy a mere two months ago.

Let alone his name, even his face should no longer be possible to recall.

"Ren Ashbell-sama will surely..."

"..."

Hearing the words escaping from Claire's lips, Rubia sighed lightly.

Claire probably had not realized that the true identity of the past «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell, was Kamito. She was simply making dream talk because her memories were confused, probably.

"Claire, the one to receive you will not be the «Strongest Blade Dancer» but the «Demon King»."

As she murmured, Rubia felt faint vibrations beneath her feet.

(Dracunia's princess? No—)

—Bathump. Her heart stung with pain.

Rubia's body sensed the presence of the awakening «Demon King».

"Apparently, Sjora Kahn's delaying failed."

Or rather, it was the witch's doing. The possibility existed for her to let him through intentionally—

"—Very well. I shall personally give you the final push to awaken."

Rubia lifted up her pure white ritual outfit and stood up lightly.

"...I'm sorry, Claire."

Before walking out the door, she shifted her gaze away from her younger sister and whispered.

"When everything is all finished, I shall be incinerated by the flames of conflagration to atone for my sins."

This was the fate of the «Sacred Maiden» who brings salvation to the world.

With a snap and rustling—the heavy ritual attire was shed off.

Illuminated by the flickering flames, the graceful curves of a beautiful nude body was revealed.

The pale white skin was covered entirely by black patterns.

Carved on her body were countless «Cursed Armament Seals».

Chapter Eight

Laevateinn

In the spiral staircase that rose into the sky, the sound of hard footsteps could be heard.

Chasing after Scarlet as she leaped nimbly, Kamito and Fianna sprinted.

The third floor was already smashed to unrecognizable levels by Leonora and Lily's fight. Weaving nimbly through the corridors where collapsed stone columns piled over one another, Scarlet ran across.

"W-Wait up... Humans can't really pass through this kind of place!"

However, these restraining words came too late and could no longer reach Scarlet on the other side.

Left with no other recourse, Kamito tried to find a way around—

"...We should be able to climb over there... Hmm!?"

Suddenly, Kamito held his chest and bent over.

"W-Wait up, Kamito-kun!"

Fianna frantically supported Kamito's back.

"...Are you okay? Could it be that the battle just now—"

"No, it's nothing."

As sweat appeared on his forehead, Kamito shook his head.

"However..."

"Hurry. I have a bad feeling about what's coming."

Kamito stood up and continued to chase after Scarlet.

(...My endurance will reach a limit sooner or later.)

Even though a «Healing Stone» was taking effect on his body right now, the body's fatigue could not be recovered so simply.

Due to the effects of performing the Absolute Blade's secret technique, the «Last Strike», his entire body's muscles were screaming in pain.

Although during his days at the «Instructional School», Kamito had learnt combat skills for self-suggestion to alleviate the body's pain, he did not dare use these techniques.

Relieving pain was essentially dulling of the senses. In a blade dance against a comparable opponent, it would be fatal.

Passing through the corridor, they mounted the spiral staircase once more—

Finally, the door to a new floor appeared before them.

"Is this the fourth floor...?"

Opening the door, they discovered a floor roughly just as vast as the third floor.

The ceiling was held up by arched pillars. Carved on the ground, a massive magic circle glowed faintly, lighting up the entire space.

The instant they stepped on this floor—

Kamito could feel divine power coursing through his entire body.

"...What is this?"

"The power in the leylines has gathered together. Because this is the «Lost Cathedral»'s core function."

"...In other words, we're close."

"Yes. Claire should be just up ahead."

Fianna nodded. Before them, Scarlet's flames could be seen flickering ahead.

Wagging its tail, she seemed to be urging them to hurry.

"Very well, let's go."

Resolving himself, Kamito was just about to take a step forward—

—Throb.

"...Ooh... Ah, guh...!"

Intense pain like being pricked by needles caused Kamito to groan in pain.

—Throb. Throb. Throb.

No ordinary pain. This was—

(...Damn, it... Came again, did it...)

—Kamito, going any further

An unknown voice, very similar to Restia's.

—Without awakening the «Demon King»'s power, you definitely cannot defeat her.

(...Mind your... own business...!)

Against the murmurs resounding in his mind, Kamito desperately resisted.

"...Kamito-kun?"

"Fianna, stay away from me a little more...!"

Hearing Kamito's sharp voice, Fianna suddenly stared with her eyes wide open.

"You're hearing that voice again?"

Kamito crouched down silently and covered his ears with his hands.

However, as if mocking Kamito's efforts, the voice continued to whisper.

—Form a contract with me, Kamito.

—Then I can grant you the «Demon King»'s power, allowing you to rule the world.

(...Stop it! I don't need that kind of thing!)

The shapeless darkness eroded his consciousness.

This was not the comforting darkness of night.

Not the mysterious darkness under Restia's rule.

Instead, this was an astoundingly otherworldly darkness.

Resembling the «Wish» that devoured her three years ago on that day.

The cruel and merciless darkness that devoured the warm heart Restia had given him, devoured his memories of the precious comrades he met at the Academy, and even devoured everything.

(Stop, it... Ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh...!)

"Please be calm, Kamito."

Suddenly, Kamito found himself being hugged by a pair of slender arms.

A supple sensation enveloped him. Beautiful silver-white hair brushed against his face.

"Es...t...?"

The sacred sword hanging by his waist had transformed back into a girl without him knowing.

"Kamito, don't worry. I am here."

Her slender arms wrapped around his neck as Est whispered softly.

The phosphorescence of her silver-white hair covered Kamito's entire body.

(...My headache... Is gone?)

At the same time, *that voice* which had been so clear earlier could no longer be heard.

«Terminus Est» was both a demon sword with an accumulated curse and also a sword that could dispel all magical effects. Similar to how she sealed away the «Brand of Darkness» Rubia had carved last time, she now sealed away the voice tempting Kamito towards the darkness.

Soon after, the phosphorescence enveloping Kamito vanished and his headache was gone.

As Est released her arms gently, Kamito slowly stood up.

"...I'm fine now. Thank you, Est."

As Kamito stroked Est's head, she half-closed her eyes in enjoyment.

"Kamito-kun... Are you seriously okay?"

"Yeah... Sorry for making you worry."

Kamito thanked Fianna for worrying about him.

"...Let's move on. Otherwise, the headaches might come again."

"Yeah, you're right..."

Fianna nodded, still showing a worried expression.

At this moment—

"Meow—!"

"...?"

Scarlet was waving her tail intensely in this dimly lit floor.

Kamito turned his gaze towards Scarlet and in that very instant—

Crimson pillars of fire erupted from the magic circle that covered the floor.

"...What!?"

As the intense, swirling flames drove away the darkness, the vast floor's entire appearance could be seen for the first time.

In the furthest depths of the floor, the door to the top level opened slowly with a low sound.

Then—

"Even now, do you still refuse to awaken as the «Demon King», Kazehaya Kamito?"

—*She* appeared there.

With flaming red hair and crystal-clear eyes of ruby.

The scarlet mask removed, showing her true face to all—the other «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell.

"...Rubia Elstein."

Kamito's forehead sweated as he called out her name softly.

Indeed, her facial features resembled her younger sister greatly.

—Kamito could not help but find the word "pretty" surface in his mind.

Walking amidst the bursting crimson flames, the figure of the «Calamity Queen» exuded a tragic sense of beauty.

"I have already cast that name away four years ago."

Rubia answered without much feeling.

"Then your current name is the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell?"

"Whether I am worthy of that name or not, that shall be determined here."

She was unfazed by Kamito's sarcasm.

Walking to the center of the floor, she stopped.

She was ten and a half steps away—a distance that could be crossed within the blink of an eye.

"—Give Claire back."

"She has already fallen to darkness. All that is left is your awakening."

"...!"

Kamito stared with his eyes wide open—

(Am I too late again?)

Then he clenched his fist tightly.

(...No, it hasn't ended yet.)

Even if Claire had fallen and become the «Darkness Queen», so long as Kamito did not awaken as the «Demon King», there was still a chance to save her.

"Claire is your sister, you know."

"Indeed. Having inherited the same blood of fire—which is why she is qualified to become a «Queen»."

"If only you were as cute as Claire."

Kamito suppressed his anger as he spoke.

"Don't blame me if I show no mercy."

...By this point, there was no room for negotiations.

Kamito communicated with his eyes with Fianna behind him, gesturing for her to retreat to the wall.

As much as he would like to have «Save the Queen»'s support, given Fianna's dual contract state with Scarlet, releasing her elemental waffe would be too much of a challenge.

Kamito gripped Est's hand as she stood beside him.

"Est, I'm relying on you."

"Yes, Kamito—I am your sword, your wish is my command."

Est's body dissipated into the air as particles of light—

Immediately, the «Demon Slayer» appeared in Kamito's hand.

"The strongest blade dancer, Ren Ashbell—return that title to me!"

"—Come with everything you've got, «Demon King»'s successor."

Thus began the blade dance between the two «Strongest Blade Dancers», both Ren Ashbell.



The spewing pillars of fire signaled the opening.

"Let's go, Est!"

Letting divine power concentrated in his legs explode, Kamito kicked the ground intensely.

Carrying the dazzling «Demon Slayer», he rushed like a flash of light.

Kamito pulled out all stops and went with full power from the very start. After all, his opponent was not someone whom one could afford to hold back against and still hope for victory.

Rubia Elstein was not wielding an elemental waffe.

Simply waving her finger to one side, she moved her lips slightly.

A tiny fireball appeared in midair—and expanded instantly.

(...Is this a fireball!?)

The fireball was the most popular move amongst all offensive magic with the flame attribute. Even for Kamito who was unskilled with all types of spirit magic, he understood a fair amount about it because the fireball was Claire's prided technique.

Kamito instantly discerned the fireball's attack range and slightly adjusted his route of advance. His aim was simply to avoid a direct hit and to ride upon the wake of the exploding wind to make his attack.

Rubia released the giant fireball from her hand.

The fireball struck the ground before Kamito directly, producing explosive wind as intense flames swirled.

The unexpected power knocked Kamito from the side, causing him to strike the floor.

(...It's so powerful!)

As his entire body hurt, Kamito lamented.

Despite being the same fireball magic that Claire used, the level of power was as different as heaven and earth.

(I guess I should say, as expected of the former «Queen»—)

Kamito instantly reformed his stance and readied his sword.

However, Rubia had already finished her next chant.

"—Come out from the gates of fiery hell, scorching hunting hounds."

Out from a magic circle that appeared in the air, three fiery «Hellhounds» were summoned, pouncing at Kamito from three different directions.

"—Too slow."

The sweeping claws of flame simply passed through empty space.

Taking a leap with his explosive leg power, Kamito jumped straight up.

Switching the «Demon Slayer» to a reverse grip in midair—

"Absolute Blade Arts, Third Form—«Shadowmoon Waltz»!"

With a flash of the sword—the three hounds were slashed in one stroke of the sword.

"The sleeping king of the volcano, release your breath—«Flame Howl»."

Without giving him a single moment of respite, flames in the form of a massive dragon attacked Kamito. Capturing Kamito's movements with god-like speed, the fire dragon chased closely after him.

(Auto-tracking magic huh?)

Clicking his tongue, Kamito halted his footsteps.

Turning around in a semicircle, he smashed the fire dragon's skull as he spun.

The fire dragon writhed painfully on the floor before disappearing into the air.

As sparks scattered all around, new pillars of fire spewed out.

But even the flames of purgatory were nothing but ragged cloth in the face of «Terminus Est»'s excellent magical resistance.

(—This is working! As long as Est is at full power.)

Using the momentum from his spin, Kamito rushed forth instantly.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Closing the distance within the blink of an eye, he unleashed a powerful strike. However—

"...What!?"

The sliced figure of Rubia disappeared without a trace amidst flickering flames.

"...Tsk, a flame mirage!"

"—I see that you have apparently recovered your senses to a level comparable to the past, Strongest Blade Dancer."

Kamito felt a presence behind him.

"...!"

He immediately spun around to unleash a horizontal slash.

However, Rubia evaded his sword with minimal movement.

"Then I shall be a little more serious—"

Blue flames were generated in her hand.

"Not even time can escape a frozen fate, conflagrating flames of absolute zero -- «Frost Blaze»."

"Your flames do not work against my Est!"

Kamito advanced without hesitation and made a second slash from the front.

Absolute Blade Arts, Fourth Form—«Blaze Slash».

The ritual sword technique for absorbing the flame attribute, this was meant to be the trump card against Rubia.

"Kamito-kun, don't do it!"

Fianna's voice suddenly called out.

(...Eh?)

Instantly, Kamito began to doubt the phenomenon before his eyes.

As soon as the tip of his sword touched the blue flames, the «Demon Slayer»'s blade was *frozen*.

"What—these flames are!?"

Demonic flames capable of penetrating the «Demon Slayer»'s magical resistance of the highest class.

For flames to freeze other objects—this phenomenon completely ran counter to «Astral Zero»'s principles.

"This is the primordial flame inherited by the Elstein bloodline—"

Receiving the frozen blade with one hand, Rubia spoke.

"True fire that transcends the power of the «Five Great Elemental Lords»."

The erupting blue flames gradually froze «Terminus Est»'s blade.

Crish—a dry sound of something breaking rocked Kamito's eardrums.

(...Est is shattering!?)

Kamito frantically withdrew his sword and leaped back.

However, Rubia did not miss her chance.

Carrying absolute-zero flames in her fist, she followed through and approached.

"I can feel it, the awakening of the «Demon King» within you."

"Why are you resurrecting the «Demon King»? What is your goal!?"

Kamito yelled as he used the «Demon Slayer» to block the freezing flames.

"A foolish question. The «Demon King» brings forth—nothing but the destruction of this world."

"—That's not right."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because your eyes are the same as Claire's."

"...What?"

Rubia displayed wavering for the first time.

Using this opening, Kamito swept away the blue flames and distanced himself.

Rubia remained rooted to the spot, glaring at Kamito with her burning eyes of ruby.

"...Back when I first met Claire, she had the same eyes."

Hoping for victory in the «Blade Dance», in order to learn the truth—

Back when Claire declared her intentions, her eyes were extremely clear.

However, it was also true that Kamito felt a certain sense of danger from the purity in those eyes.

And currently, Kamito could feel the same sense of danger from Rubia's eyes.

What compelled her actions was definitely not ambition or desire.

—But an incomparably pure sense of mission.

"..."

Rubia slowly put down her hand.

Then—

"My goal is—to use the «Demon King»'s power to exterminate the «Elemental Lords»."

Calmly, she declared.

"Exterminate the Elemental Lords... Come again?"

Kamito's eyes widened as he stammered in shock.

This was because of that certain «Wish»—

"—Indeed. Three years ago *on that very day*, you and the darkness spirit intended to realize that «Wish»."

Rubia continued, as if reading Kamito's mind.

"—Then you *failed*."

"..."

Hearing her cold words, Kamito held his breath.

—Indeed, they had failed.

Due to his memories being in a mess, Kamito could not recall what actually happened back then.

However, the fact that the «Elemental Lords» continued to exist was clear beyond a doubt.

"...Why?"

Kamito spoke as if groaning.

"Why do you want to kill the «Elemental Lords»?"

He might have asked this particular question already, three years ago.

In response to this question, how had the darkness spirit girl answered?

"In order to rebuild this world."

Rubia answered immediately.

"Rebuild the world?"

"Indeed. Destroying the «Elemental Lords» to *create a a world where spirits do not exist*, that is my goal."

"...What did you say!?"

Pondering what that implied—Kamito could not help but tremble.

The continent—the world's order was founded upon the blessings provided by the spirits.

If the power of spirits disappeared from the continent, the world would surely fall into great chaos.

This was the reappearance of the Ranbal War as Greyworth feared—No, it would cause a great war that no other war in the past could compare to.

"...How many lives do you think you'll sacrifice if you do that?"

Kamito asked in a trembling voice.

"Sacrifice huh—"

Rubia's expression remained completely unchanged.

"The price that all humans of the continent are obligated to pay for the sake of everything."

Thus she asserted.

"...Stop screwing around."

Kamito gritted his teeth, his shoulders trembling.

"For the sake of your goal... Hundreds of thousands, millions of people are going to be sacrificed."

"Supposing that is the necessary sacrifice, I will not hesitate a single bit."

"Then let me repeat myself—*Stop screwing around.*"

Immediately, Kamito's body vanished from sight. A flash of light appeared for but an instant. Infusing the divine power from his entire body, Kamito slashed at Rubia.

Rubia's «Frost Blaze» blocked the sword's blade—

"What!?"

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

But Kamito pushed the sword harder just like that.

The shining light reflected diffusedly off the frozen ice.

Sealing Rubia's movements, Kamito yelled loudly.

"Fianna, I'll leave Claire to you!"

"...Understood!"

She must have been biding her time carefully.

Fianna ran at full speed without hesitation.

"...Damn it!"

Rubia instantly released «Fireball» magic with one hand.

But before the massive fireball could devour Fianna—

A hell cat spirit jumped out from the shadows behind a pillar, inserting herself in front of Fianna—

Striking Scarlet, the fireball was absorbed before it could explode.

Passing through the burning flames, Fianna and Scarlet disappeared in the door's direction.

"That was careless of you. You forgot you are alone but we are a team."

"—It is all futile. Claire has already fallen to the darkness."

"I don't believe that willful little lady could fall so easily—!"

Yelling Kamito infused maximum divine power into the frozen «Demon Slayer».

Crack—!

The magical ice covering the blade instantly shattered.

"...Sorry, Est. I have to be a little rough."

Panting, Kamito stabbed the sword into the floor.

Blown away by the impact, Rubia murmured as she displayed an expression of disbelief.

"How could this be possible, for you to shatter «Frost Blaze»..."

"..."

Kamito withdrew his sword from the floor and once again faced off, holding the sword with both hands.

"Rubia Elstein. You are free to hold whatever ideals you want. However, when it involves unrelated people, I cannot approve."

A straight, penetrating gaze.

Rubia accepted such a gaze from Kamito head on with her eyes of ruby.

...For an instant, Kamito wondered if he was seeing things when he thought he saw the flames in her eyes waver.

"You have no idea of the tragedies I have witnessed."

"...?"

—The mood changed.

The pillars of fire bursting all over the room extinguished.

Like an omen before a storm, an instant of silence arrived.

Then—

"Words without power to back them up are useless. I learned that the very day after I became «Queen»."

The scorching air slowly revolved and gathered around Rubia.

(...This amount of heat is astounding!)

A wave of scorching heat made Kamito stomp his foot.

The vortex of hot air caught fire all at once, turning into a howling tornado of flame that began to dance.

"Now let me show you—the strongest «God-slaying Flames»."

"God-slaying flames..."

The strongest flame spirit, the one that the «Calamity Queen» reputedly stole from the Fire Elemental Lord.

The tornado of flames reached up to the ceiling and soon began to transform into *some shape*.

The *thing* that appeared before Kamito's eyes was—

Wrapped in crimson flames, an archdemon in the shape of a giant.

"..."



Kamito had seen *It* before.

Unforgettable. Four years ago—that very day when the «Instructional School» was destroyed.

"...! That was your doing, singlehandedly... Was it..."

Kamito muttered hoarsely with shock.

The archdemon-class spirit that singlehandedly destroyed the «Instructional School».

"—Yes. Thinking back, from that moment onwards, I fear that our fates became intertwined."

The archdemon of flame knelt down before Rubia. As Rubia brought her fingers together and chanted the words of releasing in spirit language, the archdemon condensed itself into a crimson demon sword held in Rubia's hands.

With a swing of the demon sword in her hands—

"This is it, the strongest elemental waffe of the flame attribute, «Laevateinn»."

Rubia Elstein announced the name.



"Huff, huff... W-What is that spirit!?"

Wielding the magic bow of ice, Rinslet panted as she spoke.

Sjora Kahn had summoned the demon spirit—«Bandersnatch».

Its appearance was a white sphere with two arms.

The middle of the sphere had a huge opening that opened and closed like a mouth.

Amongst spirits, demon spirits had particularly strange forms. This «Bandersnatch» was no exception. However, it was truly terrifying not because of its appearance—but because of its special ability.

"...Hmm, I cannot believe my wind is being devoured..."

Holding «Ray Hawk», Ellis murmured in shock.

Indeed, the demon spirit behaved as its name implied—the one who devoured everything.

"—It's coming!"

Rinslet warned.

«Bandersnatch» opened wide its huge jaws, producing a rain of freezing fangs.

These were the «Freezing Arrows» Rinslet had released earlier.

"—Evil winds, go forth and rampage!"

Ellis hastily swung «Ray Hawk», shattering the incoming fangs of ice.

However, engaging purely in defense was useless for it meant consuming divine power without achieving anything.

The shattered ice turned into sharp blades of ice that scratched Ellis' face.

"Captain! Damn it..."

Unable to bear it, Rinslet prepared to release an arrow of ice—

"No! It will get devoured again!"

"...!"

But Ellis called out to stop her.

...Right, attacking that thing was a waste of effort.

Or rather, it offered new power to it instead.

Whether Rinslet's magical ice or Ellis' wind blades, the monster had swallowed them all.

"However, if this continues, the situation will only worsen!"

"...Ooh, if only one could approach that thing—"

If the elemental waffe were used at close range for a direct attack, it should not be absorbed.

...However, it was impossible to approach. Having devoured the magical powers of both ice and wind, «Bandersnatch» was currently akin to an iron fortress.

"Fufu, then I'm coming♪"

Behind the howling winds of ice, Sjora Kahn's noisy jeering could be heard.

Then «Bandersnatch»'s spherial body suddenly shuddered.

The winds of ice stopped, bringing an instant of silence, then—

The white sphere split through the middle, like gaping jaws—jeering.

"...W-What is going on?"

Just as Rinslet whispered—

«Bandersnatch» vanished—

"...What!?"

—Or rather, it jumped, using its arms to strike the ground.

This unexpected movement caused Rinslet and Ellis to react too late.

Rumble—as the ground shook, «Bandersnatch» landed in front of Rinslet.

"...Yah!"

Rinslet screamed as she fired «Freezing Arrows» randomly.

But the arrows of ice were all absorbed by the gaping jaws, disappearing all together.

"How... could..."

Rinslet stood there in shock.

"Take this—!"

Ellis thrust «Ray Hawk» towards the monster's arm.

"...!?"

But it was virtually useless.

The monster grinned and extended a massive tongue towards Rinslet.

"—Rinslet!"

The astounding tongue was just about to swallow Rinslet.

The magic bow of ice disappeared—transforming into a beautiful white wolf that pounced at the tongue.

"Fenrir!"

ROOOOOOOAAAAAR!

The demon ice spirit's sharp claws slashed across the massive tongue.

But even its claws of ice were unable to slice open the extremely thick tongue.

"Ara, what a brave child."

Sjora narrowed her snake-like eyes.

"—That child, I want it."

As the witch brought her hands together slightly, Fenrir's movements suddenly stopped after it jumped onto the ground. From Sjora's hands came black threads which were firmly restraining Fenrir's four limbs.

«Bandersnatch» wrapped its massive tongue around the white wolf's body—

And just like that, Fenrir was swallowed whole.

"...!?"

"The Laurenfrosts' demon ice spirit, thanks for the meal."

"...NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Rinslet's despair laden cries filled the air.



The strongest elemental waffe with the flame attribute—«Laevateinn».

Rubia casually swung the sword and the erupting flames instantly consumed the surrounding space.

(...What heat.)

Evading the flames through instinct, Kamito could not dodge the heat.

Ordinary flames could not compare to this astounding heat.

The floor became red and broken like lava.

Considering this «Lost Cathedral» was built using spirit crystals that resisted the five great attributes, it was even easier to comprehend the overwhelming power of these flames.

These flames seemed as though they embodied the «Fire Elemental Lord»'s wrath.

Wherever the flames burned, the floor was turned into lava that dripped down into the floor below.

"...Without adjusting its power, even the user could be turned into charcoal."

On the other side of the swaying smoke, Rubia spoke.

Her red hair waved in the air as if assimilated with the surrounding flames.

Kamito's entire body broke out in cold sweat.

(...Truly monsters. Whether that spirit there or Rubia commanding it.)

The archdemon of flame that singlehandedly destroyed the «Instructional School».

Even if Kamito had the legendary «Demon Slayer», it was doubtful whether it could match up at only one-tenth of its original state.

As if sensing his worries—

—Don't worry, Kamito.

"...!"

He heard Est's voice in his mind.

—So long as you believe in me, Kamito, I shall never break.

"Est..."

Kamito muttered to himself, then—

"That's right..."

He gripped the sword in his hand tightly.

"Est, you are the best partner."

—Yes, Kamito.

«Terminus Est»'s blade gave off silver-white brilliance.

Amidst the swirling flames, Rubia's figure appeared, wielding the crimson sword.

The scorching blade heated the surrounding air, causing the entire floor's temperature to rise gradually.

"Careful you don't turn the «Lost Cathedral» into a block of charcoal too, okay?"

"This is already restrained to some degree. Because I cannot fully control *this*."

As Rubia swung the crimson demon sword, roaring flames instantly flew towards Kamito.

Kamito stepped on the wall and jumped up. The flames he dodged instantly destroyed the wall, creating a massive hole.

Even without a direct hit, the released heat was probably enough to instantly vaporize a human body.

"Aren't you planning on making me the «Demon King»?"

"If you're going to die to something of this level, you won't be able to kill the «Elemental Lords» anyway."

"...Tsk, stop deciding things on your own!"

Kamito stepped on the ceiling and turned around, charging at Rubia from above.

Rubia held «Laevateinn» with a reverse grip and blocked his full powered attack.

Using the reverse grip, Rubia swung the crimson sword. As sword struck sword, intense sparks were scattered.

Perhaps because activation of the flames at such close range would affect her as well, the flames remained silent.

The crimson and white blades clashed.

«Terminus Est» barely managed to resist «Laevateinn».

However—

(...If this continues, I'm gonna lose.)

Compared to Rubia the former «Queen», Kamito's total divine power was simply not on the same level.

Sooner or later, his divine power would be depleted first.

"How ironic, for your weapon to be that «Demon Slayer»."

During the intense clash, Rubia murmured.

"Oh well, assuming I really am the reincarnation of that «Demon King» guy—"

"Wrong. I am referring to the sacred sword that once fought alongside the sacred maiden, that now battles against me."

"—What?"

Taking advantage of Kamito's momentary lapse in focus, Rubia suddenly applied greater strength.

A sharp attack strong enough to numb the arms caused Kamito to enter a defensive situation.

"Hasn't the question ever crossed your mind? For a princess maiden like myself who was only responsible for rituals, how could I engage you, the «Strongest Blade Dancer», in blade dance as equals?"

"...!?"

A crimson slash flashed across Kamito's neck.

Feeling the heat wave scorch his skin, Kamito lamented.

(...Yeah right, it'd be strange if that question never crossed my mind.)

—After fighting her seriously, that sense of doubt deepened.

Talent, training—or the use of «Cursed Armament Seals» to strengthen the body.

None of these were sufficiently convincing.

"A thousand years ago, there was a girl who tended sheep on the edge of the continent. She obtained a sacred sword that was embedded in a rock."

"...?"

Rubia's sudden recounting of the past caused Kamito to stare at her in surprise.

(...What the heck? What is she talking about?)

"How could a mere girl who tended sheep prevail against the «Demon King» who ruled over powerful spirits?"

Continuing the clash of blades—Kamito finally realized.

"This is the story of Areishia Idriss?"

The «Sacred Queen» who destroyed the «Demon King» a thousand years ago.

The past contractor of the sword spirit «Terminus Est».

"—Right. The «Sacred Maiden» is the opposing existence that awakens in response to the «Demon King»'s awakening. A seed created by the «Five Great Elemental Lords» who feared the «Darkness Elemental Lord», Ren Ashdoll's resurrection."

"Could it be—You are...!"

With an acute sound, the crimson demon blade and the silver-white sacred sword crossed.

"Indeed, I am the existence that opposes the «Demon King»—the reincarnation of the «Sacred Maiden»."

"...!"

(To think she is the «Sacred Maiden»'s reincarnation?)

Completely ridiculous hogwash—dismissing her claim was all too easy.

However, Rubia Elstein's power was the undeniable truth.

"Speaking of irony, my existence itself is the most ironic. With the «Demon King»'s resurrection as my goal, intending to destroy the «Elemental Lords», for me to carry the power left behind by the «Elemental Lords». Or perhaps—"

—It was already decided by fate long ago perhaps.

Rubia murmured the last sentence to herself in self-mockery.

Blocking «Laevateinn»'s blade, Terminus Est's brightness rapidly flashed.

Was it because Kamito's divine power was about to run out, or—

(...Est, are you okay!?)

Infusing as much divine power into the sword as he could, Kamito yelled inside his mind.

Rubia Elstein was the one who inherited the «Sacred Maiden»'s power. The legitimate successor of Areishia Idriss, Est's past contractor. It was not surprising for Est to waver.

However—

—It does not matter, Kamito.

A voice sounded in his mind to refute the idea.

—I am a separate existence from the past «Terminus Est». Even if she is the successor of the past master, it does not matter.

—Because I am your sword.

Instantly, the «Demon Slayer» gave off dazzling brightness.

"Est...!"

(...Right. I have the best partner.)

Even if the opponent was the legendary «Sacred Maiden»—

"I cannot lose!"

Using his entire strength, Kamito pushed «Laevateinn» and blew Rubia away.

"I see. That sacred sword is one of the reasons why the «Demon King»'s awakening process has been delayed."

Icy flames lit up in Rubia's eyes.

"Well then, I shall shatter that sacred sword—to impart upon you true despair!"

God-slaying flames—«Laevateinn» spewed forth a crimson blaze.

(—Now is the moment!)

Kamito had been waiting for this opportunity.

Waiting for Rubia to release her strongest attack.

This opportunity only presented itself for this one instant. Failure was absolutely not allowed.

"Experience for yourself the flames of purgatory, «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell!"

As «Laevateinn»'s slash traveled, in that instant—

Kamito used his explosive leg power to leap forward.

Discerning the root of divine power, he aimed the secret technique at that very point.

"Absolute Blade Arts, Final Form—«Last Strike»!"

The super high speed slash passed through «Laevateinn»'s blade—

In the next instant, *the «Demon Slayer» shattered.*

"Est—!"

"Very well, now awaken—«Demon King»."

Then the scorching hot demon blade pierced Kamito's chest.



"Huff, huff, huff..."

At the top level of the «Lost Cathedral», before the shut door, Fianna was catching her breath.

...Indeed, this was the «True Sanctuary» of this tower.

"Meow..."

Scarlet at her feet was impatiently knocking at the door.

"...Wait a minute, it'll be ready soon."

Fianna spread her arms before the door to decipher the magic.

An average seal of magic had been applied.

Rubia probably never expected the «True Sanctuary» to be invaded. For a former «Queen», this seal was quite crude and Fianna was able to dispel it without much trouble.

As the patterns carved on the door gave off blue-white light, the door opened slowly.

A gust of wind blew through the opened door, causing all the flames on the candlesticks to flicker all at once.

Within the vast hall, the girl's figure could be found.

Claire dressed in ritual attire.

"...Claire!"

Fianna hastily rushed over.

At this moment, standing at the altar, Claire swiftly raised her hand—

In the next instant, flames erupted to block Fianna from advancing.

"...Claire?"

As Fianna halted her steps in shock, Claire faced her:

"...Who are you?"

Claire asked with empty-looking eyes.

Chapter Nine

The Awakening of the Demon King

—Kamito. Hey, Kamito.

It was that voice again... The voice very similar to hers.

His consciousness enshrouded in darkness, Kamito found himself surrounded gently by the voice.

The way her arms embraced Kamito when he was young.

(...Me—did I fail to protect *again*?)

The leather glove covering his left hand had been burned away by fire, revealing the spirit seal.

On it was written his regrets from three years ago.

This hand had failed to save her who had been devoured by darkness.

Then Kamito had failed again to protect his precious comrade—Claire Rouge.

Despite possessing enough power to be called the «Strongest Blade Dancer», when it came to truly precious people, he always—

—It is still not too late, Kamito.

(...Really?)

In his hazy consciousness, Kamito asked with dependency.

—Really. If you thirst for power, simply form a contract with me.

(Con...tract...)

Just as Kamito was about to follow the voice that surrounded him, as he was about to nod—

(Who are you...?)

He gathered his little remaining willpower and resisted.

Then the voice laughed lightly—

—My name is Ren Ashdoll. The existence you people call the «Darkness Elemental Lord».

(...What did... you say!?)

Suddenly, Kamito felt soft feathers against his face.

Before his eyes, the black-winged darkness spirit stood smiling.

A being very similar to Restia, but not Restia.

(...You are the «Darkness Elemental Lord», Ren Ashdoll?)

Kamito asked with a hoarse voice.

—Indeed, this darkness spirit is the vessel where my will inhabits.

—The being that guides towards awakening the «Demon King» who carries my power.

The *being* with Restia's appearance extended a hand towards Kamito.

—Come on, take my hand, Ren Ashbell.

—If you form a contract with me, your «Wishes» will all be realized.

(...My wish?)

namely the power to protect precious comrades—*The power to not lose anything ever again.*

(I... want...)

Kamito's final rationality was devoured by darkness.

Thus, the «Demon King» took the «Darkness Elemental Lord»'s hand.

The being with Restia's appearance melted into a mass and turned into a single-edged sword.

A jet black demon sword exuding ominous miasma.

His sanity devoured by darkness, Kamito's throat let loose a roar.



"Claire..."

Faced with Claire who was dressed in a ritual outfit colored like darkness, Fianna stood rooted to one spot in shock.

With her red hair untied, Claire resembled her older sister greatly.

The only difference lay in the characteristic of the Elstein sisters, the crystal-clear eyes of ruby.

Claire's eyes were completely empty without any light at all.

"...Who are you?"

Claire asked again. Her expression was as cold as ice.

"Did you forget me?"

Feeling a shock that frightened her, Fianna spoke up.

...It went without saying, her mind already understood. Claire most likely had her memories wiped by Rubia Elstein's magic.

However, Fianna felt a stinging pain in her heart.

Back during her days at the «Divine Ritual Institute», the only people Fianna could call friends were her junior Reicha Alminas who would later become the «Fire Queen» and her senior Rubia.

After Fianna lost the power of the spirit contract and became the «Lost Queen», everyone either mocked her secretly or treated her with caution.

However, on their first meeting—Claire had treated Fianna as an equal.

Even with circumstances imposed upon her as the «Calamity Queen»'s younger sister, Claire still moved forward with resolute will.

Claire's steadfast figure, pursuing her own «Wish» relentlessly, seemed extraordinarily dazzling from Fianna's perspective.

Fianna gazed into Claire's empty stares and spoke:

"I am Fianna Ray Ordesia—Your teammate."

"...Teammate?"

Claire inclined her head in puzzlement.

"Yes. Your comrade."

"Com... rade..."

She muttered with a sluggish voice... But soon after, she shook her head.

"—Liar. I have always been alone. I have no comrades."

"Claire..."

Fianna clenched her fist tightly before her chest.

...She really has forgotten.

Not only Fianna but also Ellis and Rinslet, even Kamito as well—

"Meow..."

At their feet, Scarlet cried mournfully.

"Claire, have you even forgotten your own contracted spirit?"

"...Contracted spirit?"

"Scarlet. You've been saved by her countless times."

"Scarlet..."

Confusion appeared on Claire's face for the first time.

Watching her, Fianna felt a little hopeful.

(...She still hasn't lost her memories completely!)

"Scarlet... That name... I know it..."

"Yes, it's the name of your contracted spirit!"

"—let... Scarlet... Ooh..."

Claire held her hand against her head and groaned.

At this moment, the wall of fire blocking Fianna's advance began to flicker and waver as if being blown by wind.

In that instant, Fianna ran towards the altar.

"...Don't come over!"

Claire released crimson flames from her hand.

"...!"

Fianna hastily laid herself flat against the floor.

The flames swept over Fianna's head, forming an intense pillar of fire behind her.

"...I am the «Darkness Queen». —The princess maiden who serves the «Demon King»."

Claire's red hair fluttered like flames.

From atop the altar, she gazed down coldly at Fianna.

"...Ooh, to think she could still command flames even though she has clearly lost Scarlet already."

The power of spirit magic originated from one's own contracted spirit. Commanding flames of this level when she had already lost her contracted spirit was supposed to be impossible.

(...So these are the flames of Elstein.)

Before these flames, even the flame spirit «Scarlet» had to be wary of them.

Because the flames of Elstein were «flames that incinerated other flames».

"...Retreat. Or else I will turn you into charcoal."

Lifting up the skirt hem of her ritual attire, Claire slowly began to walk.

"...Where are you planning to go?"

"By the side of the «Demon King» I am supposed to serve—"

"...! I won't let you go. Definitely."

Fianna glared at Claire and stood up.

"—Then if you are going to hinder me, disappear!"

Claire produced flames once more—

The flames were serious this time. A direct hit would mean death.

"Claire, I don't mind your frankness—"

In that instant, Fianna took out a spirit crystal from her bosom and threw it out.

Immediately, a bright flash filled the great hall.

"...!"

With Claire's aim disrupted, the flames spread and began burning the surroundings.

With her eyes covered, Fianna instantly rushed up the steps to the altar.

—This was Fianna's gamble.

(Claire can't possibly have lost her memories completely.)

Even though she was swallowed by darkness, the fire in her heart still gave off smoke.

Claire still remembered «Scarlet»'s name. Furthermore—

(The primordial flames had gone off mark on purpose.)

Supposing Claire was really completely devoured by darkness, that could not possibly happen.

(It's too early to despair!)

As the spirit crystal's effects ran out, the flash dissipated.

There were still six or seven steps left—the altar was farther than imagined. Perhaps Fianna had misjudged the distance visually.

However, stopping was not an option. Surrounding by spreading flames, Fianna sprinted.

"...Stop—Stop!"

Wavering, Claire released especially large flames.

Fianna found herself surrounded by flames completely without any escape—!

"...!"

Fianna ran as she closed her eyes. Just as she prepared herself for death, something red flashed before her.

—«Scarlet».

Opening her jaws to swallow the «flames that incinerated other flames», she then disappeared.

"...Eh?"

In that instant, Claire's eyes truly opened for the first time.

Fianna did not stop running. Understanding «Scarlet»'s intentions, she charged.

"Why, why won't you stop!?"

"Because I believe in you!"

(...Four more steps... Three...—)

Fianna released divine power from her entire body and passed through the burning flames.

So hot. So hot. So hot. The billowing heat wave almost made her lose consciousness.

Mustering the last of her strength, Fianna reached out towards Claire who stood there stupefied.

"Wake up! Kamito-kun is waiting for you—"

"—Kamito?"

Hearing the name, Claire's expression froze.

(I made it—)

Fianna smiled with relief—

And grabbed Claire's right hand.

Then—

"By the name of the Ordesia imperial family! Your flames, your soul—
Hereby returned!"

The «Spirit Seal» carved on Fianna's right hand disappeared and the crimson crest was emblazoned on Claire's hand.

"...Ah... Guu...!"

Claire began to cry out in pain.

(...I'll leave the rest to you, Scarlet!)



"...NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Rinslet's mournful screams resounded through the forest.

Before her eyes, the demon spirit swallowed Fenrir.

"Fenrir...!"

Displaying despair on her face, Rinslet stood motionless in shock.

The «Spirit Seal» carved on her hand disappeared silently.

"Rinslet, what are you doing!?"

Ellis cried out acutely.

In front of the dazed Rinslet, the massive white sphere opened its jaws.

"..."

However, Rinslet remained in a daze, collapsed sitting on the ground.

The gigantic tongue that had swallowed «Fenrir» licked its lips—

"...Ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

At the very last second, Ellis rushed from the side and took to the sky with Rinslet in her arms.

Then she landed some distance away and put down Rinslet.

"...How could this be possible, to devour a contracted spirit?"

Ellis moaned with a terrified expression.

Ahead of her gaze, the sphere acted restless, its appearance undergoing a massive transformation.

Expanding and contracting repeatedly, it gradually took on the form of a four-legged beast.

The simple limbs grew sharp claws and teeth appeared in the gaping jaws.

It looked like some sort of farce in mockery of proud «Fenrir».

"It assimilated Fenrir...!"

"How... could..."

"Fufu, I already said so, right? «Bandersnatch» takes everything by force."

Sjora Kahn giggled and sneered.

"Well then, I'm not holding back against the Fahrengart spirit next."

«Bandersnatch» opened its massive jaws and exhaled a blizzard.

Its breath instantly froze the ground, pinning down the two girls.

—Its power was now vastly superior to earlier.

"...Take, this—"

Readying «Ray Hawk», Ellis aimed at the demon spirit.

However, Rinslet grabbed her arm with the intent of stopping her.

"Rinslet, what are you—"

"Captain, «Fenrir» is inside there!"

Rinslet cried and lamented. Her emerald eyes were tearful.

"..."

Gripping Ellis' arm tightly, she sobbed.

Never shedding a single tear normally, she was now crying like a child.

"B-But..."

Amidst the howling blizzard, Ellis gritted her teeth.

She could sympathize deeply with Rinslet's feelings. For an elemental, the contracted spirit was a special existence. These bonds were comparable to family ties.

However, if she did not counterattack, they were going to be frozen to death helplessly.

The witch's jeering laughter was heard again. She probably figured out they were unable to counterattack.

"Damn... it...!"

Legs frozen to the ground, they were going to be completely immobile very soon.

"Is this the end..."

Faced with the blizzard blowing forth, Ellis fell to her knees. Just at this moment—

"—What a truly ugly monster."

Clang!

"...!"

Suddenly, a great sword descended from the heavens and pierced «Bandersnatch»'s head.

ROOOOOOOAAAAAAAAR!

The demon spirit instantly changed into a spherical form, howling as it rolled about on the ground.

"...What!?"

Sjora Kahn exclaimed with her eyes wide open.

Swiftly pulling out the great sword and landing on the plains of snow was—

The lovely knight dressed in the military uniform of the country of dragons.

Leader of the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor»—Leonora Lancaster.

Having retrieved the great sword that stood as tall as her, she embedded it into the ground.

"Leonora-dono...!"

Ellis exclaimed with surprise. Why would she be here—

Leonora turned towards Ellis' side.

"Kazehaya Kamito requested that I assist you two. Although I can't use my full power, I should still have strength to spare for driving the witch away."

"Kamito!?"

At this moment, the «Bandersnatch» that had been rolling on the snowy plain got up once again.

The open cut rapidly regenerated and the original ball shape was restored.

"I see, its endurance is commendable."

Leonora remarked in admiration and took up the «Dragon Slayer».

"You still have the strength to spare for driving the witch away? Interesting words you said there, Dragon Girl."

Sjora Kahn's lips separated in a cruel expression.

"Your dragon spirit, I want to eat it too."

"What could a mere demon spirit do to my «Nidhogg»?"

Leonora released the sword's aura, shaking the atmosphere.

(So this is the strongest elementalist from the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» with their longstanding victorious renown...)

Ellis gulped while Rinslet stared with her eyes wide.

The Theocracy's witch and Dracunia's Dragon Princess.

As the two faced off, tension levels rose to a maximum, at that very instant—

"...How!?" "What is happening!?"

Suddenly, the «Lost Cathedral» shook as the sound of an earthquake was heard.

"—Hmph, so it finally started."

Sjora Kahn cast her gaze towards the tower and smirked.

The sudden change in the witch's tone felt quite jarring to Ellis—

"Started? ...What is going on?"

"—The «Demon King» awakened. Darkness Elemental Lord «Ren Ashdoll»."

"Wha—"

"...Demon King?"

Ellis was dumbfounded while Leonora frowned with surprise.

Sjora gazed up at the tower as if she had lost interest in these girls. Then—

"Feel grateful for the «Demon King»'s awakening. I'll play with you girls some other time."

Together with «Bandersnatch», the witch disappeared into the magic circle on the ground.



(...Ooh, mmm...)

Claire woke up in the darkness that locked her consciousness away.

...So hot. It felt almost like the inside of a furnace.

Her memories were a mess. Currently, where was she—

(...In any case, I must leave this place.)

Someone important is waiting for her... That was the only thing she could remember.

Feeling her way around and sweeping away the mud-like darkness, she discovered faint firelight in the distance.

Rather than burning conflagration, this was a warm flame that somehow felt nostalgic.

—ter... Master, where are you...?

Someone's voice could be heard. A dream-like and worried voice.

(...Who?)

—Master!

As Claire reached out towards the flickering flame, the flame instantly burned intensely and transformed into a petite hell cat.

The hell cat called out happily and pounced into Claire's bosom.

"Ah, hot...!"

Claire could not help but cry out.

However, the fiery hell cat kept rubbing its face against her affectionately.

(...This feeling... I have an impression.)

A hole was broken in her heart. The heat from the burning flame seemed to be awakening memories from inside.

(...I have forgotten? Something important—)

Looking down at the hell cat she held in her arms against her chest, Claire desperately tried to recall.

The daughter of the Elstein family in charge of flames.

Blessing the «Demon King»'s awakening, the Darkness Queen.

(No, I am—!)

—Master, please remember! Master's precious comrades!

The flames began to burn intensely in her bosom, scorching Claire's chest.

(...I know this... I know these flames!)

Indeed, these were the flames that had guarded Claire since childhood.

Always by her side—

(...Scar...let...)

With trembling lips, Claire called out that name.

—Yes, Master!

(...You have returned, Scarlet!)

Claire hugged the burning hell cat tightly.

Instantly, the hell cat dissipated into the air as particles of light—

The «Spirit Seal», symbolizing flames, was instantly branded upon Claire's right hand.

As the power of flames filled her body, the false memories were instantly destroyed.

Then—

"...Princess, you have woken up?"

"...Mmm, Fian...na...?"

Claire opened her eyes and—

Her gaze met with the pair of dusk-colored eyes watching her from above.

Fianna's uniform was burned full of holes.

Her gorgeous black hair was in an utter mess.

"Looking like that... What happened to you?"

"...It's actually all your doing, seriously."

Sighing with exasperation, Fianna held Claire's arm and pulled her to her feet.

"Uh... I was taken here by Nee-sama—"

Claire tried to recall what happened after she came here... Then her head began to hurt.

Speaking of which, why was I dressed in this type of ritual outfit?

"No time to talk now. We must hurry over to Kamito-kun."

"...Kamito."

Claire opened her eyes wide suddenly. Just at this very moment—

A frightening noise came from downstairs.



"...Ah... Gah... Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

A howling roar like a warcry—

The awakened «Demon King» rushed into the madly dancing flames.

The weapon he held with both hands was a jet black demon sword that reflected no light. Surpassing the «Vorpal Sword» of the past, it was enshrouded in an ominous aura.

All sanity consumed by darkness, the «Demon King» simply rampaged, driven by hatred and the impulse to destroy.

—Indeed, you are the one to lead the world towards destruction.

—Devour these flames of the mortal enemy and slaughter mine enemies!

From the demon sword's blade, jet black lightning burst out and smashed the great hall's pillar.

His hair stood up on end as his eyes burned with intense hatred.

"Finally awakened huh—«Demon King» Kamito."

Rubia Elstein readied her stance with «Laevateinn».

The body of its blade was wrapped in blazing flames as it attacked Kamito.

The strongest flames of «Astral Zero» that could burn the whole world down.

However, the black miasma exuded from the «Demon King»'s body devoured the conflagration within the blink of an eye, transforming them into burning jet-black demonic flames.

"So this is the «Demon King»'s power—capable of devouring Laevateinn's «God-slaying Flames» even in a half-awakened state huh?"

"...Gah... Oh... Ahhhhhhhh!"

Roaring, the «Demon King» swung the demon sword enveloped in jet-black flames.

The flames of darkness clashed with the crimson flames, resulting in a massive pillar of fire—!

"...Gah... Oh... Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—!"

"—Yes. This is good."

Swinging «Laevateinn», flames burned in Rubia's eyes.

"This power is indeed—the «Demon King»'s power for destroying the «Elemental Lords»!"

«Demon King» and «Sacred Maiden»—as their powers resisted each other, the pillar of fire disappeared.

—Kill them... Take our enemies, kill them...!

Following the guidance of the voice, the «Demon King» brandished the jet-black demon sword.

Every time the blades met, the miasma released by the demon sword continued to shave away «Laevateinn»'s flames.

This could not even count as a blade dance—Simply the clash between overwhelming powers.

"Hmm...!"

In the magnificent battle, Rubia was gradually getting suppressed. Even though they were perfectly matched, the «Demon King»'s demon sword was slightly more powerful than the strongest flames.

"Not even time can escape a frozen fate—«Frost Blaze»!"

Rubia chanted. The blue flames of absolute zero covered «Laevateinn»'s blade and spread to the «Demon King»'s arm via the demon sword of darkness.

The «Demon King»'s right arm was frozen. However—

"...Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The loud and angry roar even caused an earthquake.

As dark black miasma spread from his body, the flames of absolute zero were shattered within the blink of an eye.

"Are you going to destroy me, «Demon King»?"

Hoho—Rubia smiled at this time.

"So be it. My will shall be inherited by Claire—"

The demon sword of darkness was swung to decapitate the «Sacred Maiden»—

—In that instant, a crimson slash flashed.



...Momentary silence dominated the great hall.

In that instant, even the burning flames stopped moving.

"—Kamito!"

Opposite the flickering flames—

The figure of Claire Rouge appeared, «Flametongue» in hand.

The flaming whip extending from Claire's hand was wrapped around Kamito's arm.

Given the «Demon King»'s power, shaking off the whip should have been an easy matter, but for some reason, Kamito did not do that.

"...Oh... Ohhh... Ohhhhhhhh..."

His eyes, filled with hatred and the impulse to destroy, turned towards Claire.

He looked towards the Darkness Queen who had lightened the burden of her clothing by burning off the lower hem of the ritual outfit.

"...Could it be possible, she recovered her memory?"

Jumping back to create some distance just as the blade was about to make contact with her neck, Rubia whispered in amazement.

Holding the whip, Claire walked directly over to Kamito who had stopped moving.

"—Hold it! *It* is not Kazehaya Kamito—You'll be killed!"

Rubia warned. However—

"No, this is Kamito. I know very well."

Claire simply shook her head.

"...Ohhh... Oh..."

Kamito—ignored Rubia and gazed unerringly at Claire who approached.

The fiery whip lost its heat, melting away and falling from Kamito's arm.

"Kamito—"

Approaching within arm's reach, Claire gazed into Kamito's eyes with her crystal-clear eyes of ruby.

Then—

"...Thank you for coming to save me. I am right here."

A soft thud—Flying into Kamito's arms and leaning against his chest, she whispered.

Dark miasma surrounded Claire but quickly dissipated.

"..."

"So, it's fine now."

Then blushing slightly, she tiptoed to reach forward.

"Turn back into the Kamito I love—"

"...!"

Lips were lightly brought together.

Kamito's dull and life-less eyes suddenly opened wide.

"...W-Wait a minute, what are you doing!?"

Peering out from behind a pillar, Fianna protested with displeasure.



Claire separated their lips lightly and continued to blush as she gazed up at Kamito.

"...Has what possessed you been exorcised?"

"...Cla...ire...?"

Kamito stood there in a daze, muttering in a stupor.

Claire gazed directly into Kamito's eyes.

"That day, what I hoped for, was not that kind of blade dance."

"...?"

As Kamito's mind was filled with puzzlement, Claire reached out with a finger and poked him in the chest.

"What I hoped for was an even more magnificent and wonderful blade dance... Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Ren Ashbell?"

Claire made a slightly shy and awkward but attractive smile.

"Claire, y-you...!"

As Kamito was rendered speechless, the demon sword of darkness slid and fell from his hand.



The endless darkness of imprisonment began to show cracks.

Locked away and tightly sealed in the depths of consciousness, the darkness spirit girl awakened.

(I, why...)

Her self and ego should have vanished completely, devoured by the «Ren Ashdoll» tainted by the «Wish». Once Kamito awakened as the «Demon King», he was not going to recall her anymore—that was what was supposed to happen.

However, why did she awaken once more?

...Incomprehensible. One could only attribute it to a miracle.

A miracle that did not happen three years ago.

(...He is calling for me.)

In the darkness, she spread her wings out slowly.

Then she extended her hand towards the air.

To grasp the hand of the young man who needed her.



...Those mutterings could no longer be heard.

Clearly he had been swallowed by the «Darkness Elemental Lord» Ren Ashdoll's voice, and fallen into darkness.

Clearly he had awakened as the «Demon King» who brought destruction to the world.

However, Kamito was able to recall his consciousness. As well as the soft sensation lingering on his lips.

"Why..."

Rubia Elstein was so surprised her voice was trembling.

"Seeing as you had already awakened as the «Demon King», why would you..."

"I'm sure you can understand that point best, Nee-sama."

Claire was the one who answered.

She stared straight at Rubia with her fiery eyes of ruby.

"The «Darkness Queen» is the queen who serves the «Demon King». And my wish as queen was delivered to Kamito."

"Refusing to fall into darkness, and yet you obtained the «Darkness Queen»'s rights...?"

"Don't underestimate me. After all, I am Nee-sama's sister."

Facing Rubia whose expression was filled with disbelief, Claire pointed Flametongue at her.

"Nee-sama, your plan has failed. Kamito won't become the «Demon King» anymore."

"...Failed?"

Rubia spoke coldly.

"The genes of the «Demon King» remain in Kazehaya Kamito's body still."

She readied the incandescent «Laevateinn».

"If *it* sleeps again, I shall simply awaken it once more."

"Nee-sama..."

Flames burst forth from the crimson blade, destroying «Lost Cathedral»'s ceiling.

"—Pick up your sword, «Demon King» Kamito. Let us continue to blade dance."

"Nee-sama, stop it... Please stop...!"

"Take cover and hide on the side. If you don't want to become a liability."

"Nee-sama..."

Holding the intensely burning crimson sword, Rubia stepped forward slowly.

Intimidated by that overwhelming presence, Claire held her breath.

...No way. In his current state, Kamito cannot defeat Nee-sama for sure.

"—Claire, it'll be fine."

"...Eh?"

Kamito tapped her on the shoulder.

Pushing Claire to the back, he stepped up.

"N-No way! Once you fight Nee-sama, again you will—"

"Don't worry. I'm not going to rely on the «Demon King»'s power."

Kamito smiled fearlessly and picked up the demon sword of darkness that had fallen on the floor.

"—Considering the title of the «Demon King», having one title as the Demon King of the Night is enough."

Kamito had faith for some reason. That *she* was present.

"Kamito, that hand..."

Claire's eyes widened suddenly.

"Yes, the one I will rely on is—"

Instantly, the spirit seal carved on his left hand gave off dazzling brilliance.

What appeared was proof of the «Strongest Blade Dancer», the seal of the darkness spirit.

The pain of what he lost three years ago. The nostalgic feeling of souls linked deeply.

"...Hey, can you hear my voice?"

Kamito whispered intimately to the demon sword in his hand.

The brightness of the darkness seal instantly intensified. Blood dripped from the seal, flowing along the demon sword's hilt to gradually dye the jet-black blade red. Then—

"Please! Lend your power to me once more—Restia!"

—I've been waiting all this time for you to say that, Kamito.

In his mind, her voice resounded.

It was not the voice of the «Darkness Elemental Lord», Ren Ashdoll. Kamito was certain he had not heard wrong, this was her voice.

Intense sparks flew from the seal on his left hand and the demon sword of darkness instantly changed its form in his hand.

A familiar sense of balanced weight. In his hand was the feeling of the sword he was well accustomed to.

The original appearance of the demon sword of darkness—the elemental waffe, the «Vorpall Sword».

"Restia..."

Kamito's sword which had finally returned after three years.

The cold gleaming body of the black blade was beautiful to a breathtaking degree.

However—

—Kamito, let's save the talking for later. First we must figure out how to defeat her.

"Yeah, you're right."

Reminded by Restia's voice, Kamito's attention returned to Rubia before him.

"Useless."

Wielding «Laevateinn», Rubia closed in.

The heat from the madly dancing flames mercilessly roasted Kamito's skin.

"That sword you hold there cannot defeat me, the «Sacred Maiden»."

"...Yes, you are right."

Kamito nodded frankly and admitted the fact.

It was just as she said. Even if he retrieved his power from his «Ren Ashbell» days completely, it was still not enough to defeat the «Sacred Maiden» who wielded «Laevateinn»'s god-slaying flames.

Ren Ashbell's power alone *was not enough*.

Hence—

"Come forth, *Est!*"

Kamito summoned his other partner.

The «Demon Slayer» that Rubia's «Laevateinn» had shattered.

—Yes, Kamito. I am your sword, your wish is my command.

An adorable voice resounded in his mind.

As the spirit seal on his right hand glowed, «Terminus Est»'s blade was reconstituting itself in Kamito's hand.

"What!?" "No way...!"

Rubia stared with her eyes wide open as Claire exclaimed in surprise.

The «Vorpall Sword» with its jet-black darkness as well as the «Demon Slayer» with its silver-white brilliance.

Two legendary swords of equal standing were now gathered in Kamito's hands.

"Thanks, Est."

Kamito expressed his gratitude to the sacred sword that appeared in his right hand.

At this time, the blade of the demon sword in his left hand shook slightly.

—Miss Sacred Sword, please don't drag me down.

—The same goes for you, please don't get in my way.

In response to Restia's taunting, Est displayed a rare moment of oppositional defiance.

"You two, please don't talk in my mind at the same time..."

Smiling wryly, Kamito crossed his twin swords and entered a stance.

Perhaps intimidated by the wind produced by the swords, Rubia quietly halted her steps.

"Claire, watch carefully."

"Eh?"

Kamito declared boldly to Claire behind him.

It seemed like Claire had already figured out Kamito's true identity.

Then there was no need to hide his past from her anymore.

"—I am the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell."

"...!?"

Hearing her gasp behind him, Kamito sprang into action.

Wielding the two strongest swords, he ran forward all at once—!

"Foolish. «Elemental Waffen» cannot be used under conditions of dual contracts."

Rubia's «Laevateinn» swept horizontally all space before him.

The crimson flames bursting forth instantly vaporized a stone pillar and flew towards Kamito.

"Kamito!" "Kamito-kun!"

Claire and Fianna's screams echoed within the floor. However—

"I've heard that the «Demon King» in the past was able to use seventy-two spirits all by himself!"

Kamito kicked the ground to take a flying leap, stepping decisively into the flames.

"—O darkness, devour the flames to become my strength!"

The horizontally sweeping «Vorpall Sword» cleared away the crimson flames. Taking advantage of Rubia's instant of wavering, Kamito proceeded to swing the «Demon Slayer» wielded in his right hand.

"...!?"

Rubia barely blocked the sword. In the instant the blades clashed, intense flames exploded from «Laevateinn»'s body.

Kamito did not stop his series of attacks. Still crossing blades with «Laevateinn» using the «Demon Slayer», Kamito added on top of it a strike from his left hand's «Vorpall Sword».

The spewing flames were suppressed entirely by the demon sword of darkness while the shining «Demon Slayer» gradually pressed near Rubia.

"Impossible... Why!?"

Rubia Elstein's eyes displayed signs of fear.

Faced against the consecutive strikes of the twin swords, «Laevateinn» was subdued despite the fact that it was supposed to be the strongest flame elemental.

"Ohhhhhhhhhh!"

Pushing against «Laevateinn», Kamito hammered the «Demon Slayer» again. Repeatedly, again and again, it was as though he were forging a long sword in a fiery furnace.

"...I cannot lose, in order to save this world."

"Your way of doing things is not going to save the world!"

Yelling, Kamito swung down the twin swords infused with divine power.

The elemental waffe «Laevateinn»'s crimson blade began to show cracks.

Kamito was overwhelming the opponent, purely through sword skills rather than the Demon King's power.

"Sacrificing the weak and using your younger sister is wrong!"

"Shut up. You have never tasted true despair, that's all."

"I understand despair very well. Three years ago, when I failed to protect her—!"

As the twin swords of light and darkness danced, the flames of purgatory were swept away. Realizing her disadvantage in a close range combat, Rubia distanced herself and raised «Laevateinn» up high overhead.

Intense, burning, gigantic flames formed a vortex with the crimson blade as the center.

This was the «Calamity Queen»—Rubia Elstein's full powered special move of the sword.

That was exactly what Kamito targeted.



(Est, Restia—I'm relying on you!)

The «Demon Slayer» gave off dazzling brightness while the «Vorpal Sword» became enveloped in jet-black lightning.

This next attack was infused with all of his remaining divine power. Failure meant death.

"Magical equipment release—«Muspelheim»!"

Rubia Elstein unleashed the greatest and most powerful flames.

"—Let this strike decide the victor!"

Yelling that, Kamito leaped at the intensely burning purgatory.

Then—

"Absolute Blade Arts, Final Form—«Last Strike • Dual»!"

Using dual wielding to perform the secret technique, Kamito smashed apart Rubia's «Laevateinn».

—END

Afterword

Author

—Considering the title of the «Demon King», having one title as the Demon King of the Night is enough!

Hello everyone, I am Shimizu Yuu. I am once again very thankful for everyone who has picked up this book. This time, I present to you the tenth installment of *Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance*, "The Awakening of the Demon King"!

The worst reunion occurring amidst burning flames. With the entrusted «Vorpall Sword» returning to Kamito's hands, *her* murmurs will lead Kamito to awaken as the «Demon King». The conspiracy-filled «Cross Fire» finally welcomes the final battle against Rubia Elstein. Will Kamito be able to save the captive Claire—?

And thus, the series finally reaches double digits with the tenth volume. This work has only been able to get this far with all the readers who have supported all along, as well as the efforts of many many people. I will continue to strive hard and I hope everyone can continue to support!

Next comes the acknowledgements. To Sakura Hanpen-sensei who has drawn many beautiful illustrations again, I am truly very grateful. The two spirits on the cover are too adorable.

Narita-sama in charge, for making up lots of different plans for promoting the *Seirei* series, thank you thank you. Let's continue to work hard together.

Also, there's Hyoujyu Issei-sensei who serializes the manga version on Comic Alive. Congratulations on the release of the manga's first volume.

The girls are very cute, the blade dance scenes are super cool, together with some slight ecchi fan service, it is simply the best. Due to the Hyoujyu-sensei's supplementing the designs on the art front, I feel that those who have read the original can still immerse themselves even deeper and enjoy the *Seirei* world through the manga. This is a really great and high quality manga, so I hope everyone can grab it together with this book to the cashier (it's being sold at the same time as Volume 10!) Also,

the official mini guidebook is being given out through lucky draws at the manga promotion event going on right now, please feel free to attend (For details please read the accompanying book band).

Finally, the greatest thanks goes to the readers. I am very happy to receive letters and survey comments. In Volume 9's popularity poll, Est remains supreme but Restia has returned to second place. 3rd is Ellis, 4th is Leonora, 5th and 6th are Rubia and Claire respectively, giving a kind of Elstein sisters combo impression."

—Well then, the «Blade Dance festival arc» finally draws to an end in the next volume. Let us meet again in the in the eleventh installment, "Elemental Lord Assassination (tentative)", when the truth of what happened three years ago will be revealed!

Shimizu Yuu, January 2013

Illustrator

Welcome and welcome back, I am Sakura Hanpen!

A dual character cover! The dual spirit combo cover.

To be honest, trying to draw two people on the cover with the same dimensions really gave me a hard time figuring out... So difficult.

I must work even harder, that was what I felt strongly in this volume.

Also, we finally see it! Kamito's dual wielding!

Thinking far back to when Restia first appeared, I was speculating the possibility of Restia dying → Est awakening... (stares into the distance)

Because I personally like matching black with white, I like these two characters very much, drawing them together was very enjoyable.

And now I really want to see Volume 11 as soon as possible...

Besides, because of these two taking up space I must stop here...

So let us meet again next volume!

2013 XX 桜はんぺん